

# VUE

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ANNENBERG INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL REFORM • *Voices in Urban Education*

## The Boys Aren't Broken, The Systems Are Changing the Narrative about Young Men of Color

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Growth, and Transformation

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## ABOUT

This issue of *VUE* was planned and produced by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University in collaboration with the Research Alliance for New York City Schools at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. It is based on the conference "Studying Systemic Efforts to Improve Outcomes for Black and Latino Males," focused on Black and Latino male initiatives in seven districts, held on September 18–19, 2017, in New York City. This research conference was supported by a grant from the Education Research Conferences Program of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Each article in this issue was written by one of the research-practice teams attending the conference. These pieces highlight the unique contexts, approaches, and experiences of the seven participating districts.

The Boys Aren't Broken, The Systems Are: Changing the Narrative about Young Men of Color  
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# VUE

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# Disrupting Structural Racism: Counter-Narratives of Pride, Growth, and Transformation

ROSANN TUNG AND ADRIANA VILLAVICENCIO

*Scholars and practitioners around the country are collaborating to build an asset-based counter-narrative about young men of color and develop concrete, evidence-based strategies to better serve them in schools and classrooms.*

I [Adriana Villavicencio] could hear roaring applause from outside the classroom. Inside, almost thirty boys were clapping and cheering, some halfway hanging off their seats, some standing up. I thought maybe they had just gotten news about an unexpected school break, a class trip, or the Brooklyn Nets making it to the playoffs. But I was mistaken. They were cheering for the students in each grade who had earned the highest GPA that semester, as well as the students whose GPAs had improved the most. They were a group of Black and Latino ninth- and tenth-grade students, each paired with a mentor from the eleventh and twelfth grade. They met twice a week to talk about their classes and learn about the college application process. They had traveled on trips upstate and had visited historically Black colleges several states away. I revisited the class throughout that year and was always struck not only by the intimacy of the relationships, but also by the commitment of the educators to provide a safe space and the resources students needed to meet their goals.

What the school staff and students had co-created at the High School for Law and Public Service in New York City is not unique. Since then, I have had the good fortune of talking with district leaders and educators from around the country – from Los Angeles Unified to Kansas City, from Boston to Oakland, California – all local stewards of President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) initiative. They’ve shared stories of their young men becoming leaders in their schools and in their

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communities, bolstered by a supportive network of educators, researchers, and leaders willing and able to call out the racism inherent in our school systems and committed enough to invest resources to combat it. This network of change agents has showcased stories and strategies on national calls hosted by the White House; we've presented at conferences; and sometimes we read about each other's work in the media and in journals like this one.

And yet, we largely work in silos. When the conferences end, we go back to our corners of the world and attend to the pressing needs before us. We may take a few good ideas back with every intention to reconnect, but more often than not, we part ways having talked about our work, but not really learning from others.

## LEARNING TOGETHER ABOUT SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Born out of a desire to break out of our silos, my co-author and colleague, Rosann Tung, and I set out to organize a small convening of educator-researcher teams from across seven districts engaged in MBK efforts. The convening took place in September 2017, sponsored by the American Educational Research Association. The seven districts were geographically diverse, of different sizes,<sup>1</sup> but all majority Black and Latino, and all proactively using critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic 2012) and/or targeted universalism (powell 2009)<sup>2</sup> to inform practice and policy at the system level. Each district brought leaders of initiatives focused on boys and young men of color and collaborating researchers charged with documenting the implementation of these initiatives and outcomes for the young men involved in them.

Our goals were to gather a small enough number of participants to ensure deep conversation in a convening long enough to foster authentic connections among us, and to include mechanisms to sustain these conversations long past the convening itself. The convening would be an opportunity for us not only to present the glossy brochures and highlight what is working in our respective districts – and there is much that is working – but also to face what was hard about this work, ask each other tough questions, and figure out ways to continue our efforts despite constant changes in administration and cuts to funding.

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* is a product of that convening and our aspirations to advance the conversation around better serving young men of color, while also providing a framework for understanding this work, a set of concrete strategies to make it come alive in schools and classrooms, and a lens to examine its effectiveness over time.

## COMMON THEMES

In a study I [Rosann Tung] co-led in Boston, a well-intentioned elementary school teacher answered our question about her approach to meeting the needs of Black or Latino males in her classroom in this way:

We treat everybody the same. If you're a boy or you're a girl, you're still treated the same. Like I said, races are the same. . . . I don't really see any difference.

.....  
<sup>1</sup> The districts range greatly in size: New York City, 1.1 million students; Chicago, 371,400; Austin, 81,400; Guilford, NC, 71,900; Boston, 56,000; Minneapolis, 37,200; Oakland 36,900.  
<sup>2</sup> See also <https://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/targeteduniversalism>.

Responses like these peppered that study, which documented the systemic opportunity gap facing Black and Latino male students in Boston Public Schools (Tung et al. 2015).

This kind of “color-blind” lens and practice (Bonilla-Silva 2014) is what educators and scholars gathered at our September 2017 conference were attempting to disrupt. Although most participants had never been in conversation with each other, they converged in a striking number of non-traditional ways. They all saw their young men of color as experts on their communities rather than as blank slates to mold. They took responsibility for being responsive to race and gender rather than being color-blind. Their initiatives focused on changing the adults in the system rather than on changing the youth.

As a result, the language that participants used at the conference was asset-based and explicitly anti-racist, rather than deficit-based or silent about race, as mainstream education language sometimes can be. Counter-narratives abounded of pride, growth, and transformation *in spite of* entrenched structural racism.

The district policies, programs, and practices that conference participants shared also ran counter to mainstream, piecemeal solutions, such as test preparation and punitive discipline policies. System-wide strategies included professional development on examining privilege and implicit bias, programming that addresses trauma and socio-emotional development, restorative discipline practices, and recruitment of men of color from the community as teachers and mentors. Curriculum was relevant, engaging, and action-oriented.

## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This collection of articles shares some of the highlights of the AERA-sponsored research conference and the perspectives of scholars and districts engaged in systemic initiatives to improve education for young boys and men of color. The first two articles exemplify system-wide commitment to and rationale for the focus on Black and Latino male students, providing rich stories of program implementation in schools across Oakland and Boston that emanate from dedicated central offices charged with closing opportunity gaps. Next, Guilford County (NC), Minneapolis, and New York City portray culturally sustaining practices through keen attention to healthy and respectful relationships among community members, educators, and students. Given that half of the participants at the conference were researchers and evaluators, the next two articles describe how research-practice partnerships provide data that enhances policy and programming. We close with a model from Austin for scaling the focus on young men of color from local to state, regional, and national networks.

We hope to build on the momentum from this conference by continuing to share promising practices and policies through future, expanded convenings. This work challenges us to answer the questions: How do we transform the dominant systems and narrative into ones that close opportunity gaps and develop Kings?<sup>3</sup> How can we build capacity and community among educators and policymakers engaged in this work not just in these cities, but across the country . . . and not just for a season, but for years to come?

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3 For more about the use of the term “Kings” for young African American men, see the article by Chatmon and Gray in *VUE* no. 42 at <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/42>.

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# Decolonizing School Systems: Racial Justice, Radical Healing, and Educational Equity inside Oakland Unified School District

CHRISTOPHER P. CHATMON AND VAJRA M. WATSON

*A deep district-wide commitment to racial equity for African American male students, based on the framework of targeted universalism, has laid the foundation for expanding the focus to include African American girls, Latinola students, and Asian and Pacific Islander students.*

Educational spaces, like the rest of our nation’s current policy arenas, have become a contentious terrain where ideological and political battles are fought and particular futures won. We write this article in the aftermath of the atrocity at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, in August 2017, where racism, racial rage, hate, violence, and death took center stage during a white supremacist rally at an institution of higher education. A month later, motions were set into play to repeal the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program – impacting the legal rights of children of immigrants to attend school.

Oakland is also a battlefield. The innovative work of the Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA)<sup>1</sup> in Oakland Unified School

District (OUSD) is part of a larger legacy to reimagine schooling as powerfully inclusive and unapologetically democratic. We offer a racial justice paradigm for other school systems struggling to move towards educational equity.

## THEORY OF CHANGE: TARGETED UNIVERSALISM

A driving, essential question within AAMA’s theory of change is, *who is the canary in the coal mine* – that is, who will be affected first and most severely by the toxicities of the system? This question derives from John Powell’s (2009) extensive legal scholarship on

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1 See <https://www.ousd.org/Domain/78>.

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structural racism and racialized spaces. To achieve equity, his framework, *targeted universalism*, focuses on those least served. The National Equity Project describes it in this way (Perrius 2011):

Targeted Universalism alters the usual approach of universal strategies (policies that make no distinctions among citizens’ status, such as universal health care) to achieve universal goals (improved health), and instead suggests we use targeted strategies to reach universal goals.

In other words, problems of society are likely to spill over into the lives of everyone – just as the lower Ninth

inputs then create improvements that cascade out, affecting the policies and practices of the larger collective.

## OAKLAND ELEVATES A COUNTER-NARRATIVE: OFFICE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ACHIEVEMENT

In the K–12 system, the urban school crisis affects African American males unlike any other ethnic or gender group (Ferguson, 2001; Ginwright, 2010; Howard, Douglas & Warren 2016; Noguera, 2009). Consistent with these national patterns, OUSD was facing major challenges with educating Black males successfully. On nearly every academic indicator, these students were disproportionately unsuccessful in school. In 2009-2010, African American males in OUSD were chronically absent: missing 17.6 percent of the academic year in elementary school, 19.8 percent in middle school, and 22.2 percent in high school. Even though they comprised 17 percent of the population, Black males accounted for 42 percent of the suspensions annually and their graduation rate was only 41 percent.<sup>2</sup>

The district applied powell’s framework of targeted universalism to Oakland and devised a plan to elevate African American male students and, in the process, improve the educational ecosystem for all children.<sup>3</sup> OUSD joined forces with community organizers, religious leaders, neighborhood elders, teachers, parents, and students to launch the Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA). These pioneers made the formal declaration that, “African American male students are extraordinary and deserve a school system that meets their unique and .....

2 Data in this section are from the OUSD Research, Assessment, and Data department.

3 For more on targeted universalism in Oakland, see Chatmon & Gray 2015.

“African American male students are extraordinary and deserve a school system that meets their unique and dynamic needs.”

– Office of African American Male Achievement

Ward was not the only part of New Orleans to suffer in the wake of Katrina, nor did the subprime credit crisis end in poor, urban communities, but, rather, spread throughout the global economy (powell, 2009; powell & Watt, 2009). To improve the entire ecosystem, specific *institutional targets* need to expose, address, and uplift those who are least served. Strategic

dynamic needs.” To accomplish this goal, Oakland dared to name institutionalized racism – and not the children – as the problem. Under the leadership of one of the authors, Christopher Chatmon, various listening campaigns and initiatives were launched to disrupt underachievement by elevating a counter-narrative of Black educational excellence.

At the writing of this article seven years later (late 2017), AAMA’s flagship Manhood Development elective course is now being offered at twenty-three elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the district, out of a total of eighty-seven district-run schools, and serves around 16 percent of the African American male student population. These academically rigorous classes are taught by African American male teachers who form deep relationships with the students and help them navigate through school and life. Students develop an understanding of who they are as African American males, develop a brotherhood among classmates, and boost their academic achievement by building their vocabulary and studying challenging, culturally responsive texts (Ross et al. 2016; Watson 2014). To date, AAMA has focused on eliminating four problematic conditions: harsh discipline, unequipped teachers, biased curriculum, and the media’s negative portrayal of African American males.

AAMA has contributed to the system-wide transformation of OUSD. Significant shifts have emerged because of AAMA’s theory of change and strategies. Seventy-five percent of the AAMA instructors are now funded through the district. From 2011-2012 to 2015-2016, the suspension rate for African American males decreased from 17.7 percent to 10.8 percent, and the raw numbers fell by 48.8 percent, from 1,200 to 614. From 2010-2011 to 2015-2016, the cohort graduation rate increased from 41.3 percent to

59.8 percent. While we cannot attribute these changes exclusively to the efforts of AAMA, they do suggest that the district is moving in the right direction.

AAMA has received national recognition, with features in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, and the *Huffington Post*. When former President Barack Obama launched *My Brother’s Keeper*, AAMA was heralded as a beacon of promise. Subsequently David Johns, the previous executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans, frequently visited Oakland to garner best practices in the field. Chatmon received the prestigious recognition as a *Leader to Learn From* by *Education Week*.

## SCALING UP RACIAL JUSTICE: THE OFFICE OF EQUITY

Although AAMA focused strategically on engaging, encouraging, and empowering African American male students, children do not develop in isolation. For AAMA to increase its impact, students’ families and their neighborhoods needed to become an explicit part of the solution. Moreover, district demographics are ever-changing; 41 percent of students are now Latinx. Focusing on the needs of Black boys is a step towards racial justice, but it is not the entire journey.

Building upon the successes of AAMA, in 2016, I (Chris Chatmon) launched the Office of Equity to implement the next stage of targeted universalism and take the work of racial equity and healing to scale. First, my colleagues and I are broadening support beyond African American males and have launched initiatives for African American girls and for other racial/ethnic groups. The Office of Equity aims to energize, inspire, and empower

students and staff at all levels of the district to develop initiatives that actively disrupt systemic inequities associated with race, gender, ethnicity, and class; examine biases; create inclusive and just conditions; and improve outcomes for African American, Latino/a, and Asian and Pacific Islander students.<sup>4</sup>

The Office of Equity is joining together piecemeal movements that have been under way in Oakland for generations. Each program director is tasked with organizing deep listening campaigns with key constituents and holding a community conversation around the findings. Similar to AAMA, programs are student-centered and asset-based. However, there are also differences. For instance, fights among African American girls were escalating, so a plan was devised to organize restorative healing circles. By continuously elevating the children – in particular, children of color – who are furthest away from opportunity, OUSD is addressing and ameliorating structural disparities in schooling.

Another key shift under way is the expansion of the AAMA theory of action. After several years of work with individual schools at more than twenty sites, the application of targeted universalism has intentionally moved toward greater efficacy and deeper support for school communities, using a regional approach in the city’s most disparate pockets of West Oakland.<sup>5</sup> In partnership with OUSD’s Office of Research, Assessment, and Data, the Office of Equity compiled information based upon neighborhood stress levels (1=least stressed to 6=most stressed) that took into account a normalized composite score for several indicators, such as crime, food security, socio-economics, and other environmental issues. The entire West Oakland Area

received an overall score of 4.48, and from there, two sites were selected.

As part of this strategy, both AAMA and the African American Female Excellence (AAFE) initiative will now be housed directly in West Oakland. My staff and I are wrapping around an elementary and middle school (in a feeder pattern) with the goal of creating an ecological change for African American students *and* families. With stronger, real-time relationships and the efficiency of co-location, AAMA/AAFE leaders will be able to develop rhythms with principals and culture keepers at each site with greater traction and nuances. Key strategies and programs include adult learning, mentorship, and restorative circles, among others.<sup>6</sup>

These strategies and programs have all been piloted independently at other Oakland school sites over the last seven years, but never before has there been a synergy of scope to align the best of these practices simultaneously within a feeder pattern. Ultimately, this prototype program will serve as a “proof point” to further accelerate the change necessary to utilize schools as beacons for community revitalization (Warren 2005, 2014). The vision is to shift the narrative by normalizing success, celebrating community assets, and reclaiming the legacy of African American power in West Oakland.

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4 For a diagram representing the different initiatives of the Office of Equity, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

5 We are using *network improvement science*, an approach to applying a methodology to a scaled problem of practice in multiple venues, to apply targeted universalism for AAMA across our network of schools. See <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/our-ideas/>.

6 For more detail on inputs and expected outcomes, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

## DECOLONIZE SCHOOLING: A RACIAL JUSTICE FRAMEWORK

Which logic models are useful if the system itself is illogical? This rhetorical question helps break open the mythologies of white supremacy and the injurious nature of colonialism. School systems are not innocent bystanders in the reproduction of racism. Oppression constrains, confines, and suppresses the collective imagination. But education – whether in a classroom, community center, or at the kitchen table – can seed social change. As we critique the functions of schools, we cannot forego the liberatory nature of learning (Patel 2016).

The Office of Equity in OUSD has taken a number of action steps to decolonize school practices and curriculum, such as a series of rituals of resistance that, when practiced consistently and holistically over time, create shifts in the culture of the institution. Meetings and community events honor the ancestors, respect the past, and acknowledge the land; distinctive histories and herstories nourish a collective appreciation for difference; and the present is celebrated through the lives of the children, for they embody the future. Racial justice, radical healing, and educational equity are at the center of this movement.

Other action steps include an aggressive campaign to recruit and support Maestr@s – Chicano/a and Latino/a educators – that attracted fifty interested candidates in the first week; a new annual Latino/a staff appreciation gathering attended by 100 Latino/a staff; a Latino staff directory aimed at building a network for staff and creating support systems for students and families; and collegial space for African American and Latino/a instructors to work hand-in-hand and share pedagogical techniques and resources. Based on the success of AAMA models, one high school with

a high proportion of Latinos will pilot a newcomer intervention program to support unaccompanied minors arriving from Central America, and will launch a culturally sensitive mentoring program.<sup>7</sup>

Altogether, a racial justice paradigm exposes systemic ills, asks the hard questions, and simultaneously incubates possible answers. A “one size fits all” approach can become yet another Eurocentric entrapment of homogeneity. In our social justice work, we strive to reject the colonialism that pits people and programs against one another for funding and attribution.

The Office of Equity was born out of a struggle against racism; in Oakland, the ground was fertile because of generations of activism within and beyond the borders of the school district. The fight continues because the disproportionate failure rate of children of color is no longer an option. As equity-based work gains in popularity, it must guard against becoming just another fad that is pursued half-heartedly by districts but never fully realized.

Equity is not strictly policy-driven or compliance-based. It is a value system of service, humility, and love. It is about how individuals show up and work together, with purpose and integrity, to move the mountain of school reform. We are striving to transform systems to become more soulful, more humane, and inevitably more democratic.

We are constantly challenged and at times overwhelmed. It is essential to maintain a community of critical colleagues who are willing to struggle alongside one another. This work is not easy, because ecosystems of oppression can seem intractable.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

However, we are constantly reminded that courage is contagious, much like fear. Fear burdens and weighs heavily upon the heart, while courage enlightens. Both authors were struck by a recent call-to-action circulating on social media: *If you build a wall, we'll grow wings*. It is time to fly. As Assata Shakur teaches,

It is our duty to fight for  
our freedom.  
It is our duty to win.  
We must love each other and  
support each other.  
We have nothing to lose but  
our chains.

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## FURTHER RESOURCES

- Kingmakers of Oakland*: <http://kingmakersofoakland.org>. A new docu-series on the Office of African American Male Achievement.
- Radical Healing with Dr. Shawn Ginwright*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxbRQx\\_8TUA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxbRQx_8TUA). This short video (under five minutes) on equity is a powerful teaching and organizing tool, designed to bring joy to justice and liberation to learning.

# A District-wide Approach to Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Practices in the Boston Public Schools

COLIN ROSE AND MWALIMU DONKOR ISSA

*The district's system-wide professional development on culturally sustaining practices creates consistent expectations for educators to address their biases, build relationships with students and parents, and improve instruction – and gives them the tools to do so.*

What CLSP [culturally and linguistically sustaining practices] has done is put into words what conscientious career educators already know: students don't care what you know unless they know that you care. That has a tangible impact on student outcomes: "Do you know enough about me to teach me?" We have begun work on cultural awareness, where we are asking ourselves, "What do you know about yourself and your perceptions, and what do you know about your students?" . . . And when we begin to reflect, we can have a much broader view of the inputs necessary to support student growth, especially when it comes to those groups of students who are often unsuccessful at our school.

– Eugene Roundtree, Headmaster,  
Snowden International High School

**L**ongstanding mainstream narratives and systems – built on assumptions about what knowledge is relevant, what values and behaviors are necessary or normal, and who can achieve in school – affect beliefs, practices, and decision making at all levels of education and social systems. A sordid history of domination, mistreatment, and neglect is mixed into the foundations of our societal systems, and the educational system has not been immune. Marginalized students are seen as incapable learners who need to be fixed or converted in order to do well in school.

These ingrained beliefs are reinforced by district policies, programs, and structures that may be well-intentioned, but often add more impediments for students historically marginalized and perpetuate or

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exacerbate unequal outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Nothing illustrates such misguided decisions and lack of intentionality as well as the 2014 and 2015 reports on the inequitable opportunities<sup>2</sup> and promising practices/unfinished business<sup>3</sup> for Black and Latino Males in the Boston Public Schools (Miranda et al. 2014; Tung et al. 2015).

It is in this context that the Office of Opportunity and Achievement Gaps (OAG), of which I [Colin Rose] am assistant superintendent, has embarked on a journey to put cultural proficiency front and center in the Boston Public Schools (BPS). Adopting the theory of *targeted universalism* has given us an alternative frame for school improvement to take broad action based on the needs of the most marginalized groups to ensure that all levels of impediments for these students are addressed, thus addressing barriers for all.<sup>4</sup> From this foundation, we have set out to intentionally and unapologetically bring change to the interface between schools and historically marginalized populations in an attempt to reverse years of structural and cultural oppression. In the summer of 2016, I was able to work with Superintendent Tommy Chang and other district leaders to express this fact as our district’s “problem of practice,”<sup>5</sup> which culturally and linguistically sustaining practices (CLSP) are intended to address.

## THE CYCLE OF LEARNING FOR ALL OF BPS

For over a decade, cultural proficiency has been identified as a major lever of change for Black and Brown students in BPS, both in the original 2006 Achievement Gap Policy and again in the recently adopted 2016 version (BPS 2016). However, there has not been a sustained definition and core set of competencies that would bring coherence to what this means for BPS.

This ambiguity allowed cultural proficiency to be relegated to something ancillary, when it should be in the forefront in every element of our work.

To combat this sidelining, and influenced by multiple sources<sup>6</sup> on culturally responsive and anti-racist education, I defined a set of competencies that all individuals within our systems should possess, or CLSP, which call for three specific competencies:<sup>7</sup>

- awareness/consciousness of the structural and cultural biases that inform our systems and personal cultural views;
- authentic learning of/relationship building with communities, parents, and students;
- the adaptation of practice to build on assets and match needs based on the foundation of the prior two competencies.

We will only truly operationalize targeted universalism in our district when all individuals – from food services to academics, school

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- 1 For research supporting these concepts, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.
- 2 <http://cce.org/files/Opportunity-and-Equity-Full-Report-FINAL.pdf>
- 3 [http://cce.org/files/PromisingPractices\\_UnfinishedBusiness\\_FullStudy\\_FINAL.pdf](http://cce.org/files/PromisingPractices_UnfinishedBusiness_FullStudy_FINAL.pdf)
- 4 The term targeted universalism was coined by Harvard University political scientist and sociologist Theda Skocpol and popularized by John Powell. For more, see the article by Christopher Chatmon and Vajra Watson in this issue of *VUE*.
- 5 For complete details on the problem of practice, see [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1MuyTg3Xx9S4x\\_JAEHUrjLtyZnZ7-pQCZfnu9lahhe\\_c/edit#slide=id.g25592045d2\\_0\\_0](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1MuyTg3Xx9S4x_JAEHUrjLtyZnZ7-pQCZfnu9lahhe_c/edit#slide=id.g25592045d2_0_0).
- 6 See <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MZYGKuPjrg4RksoJ0WXvnSeHueqpBsSerNWJMskktRQ/edit>
- 7 For a complete list and description of these competencies, see <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B5Q4XDpkAw74dZln50pWMMWpLVUU/view>.



committee members to lunch monitors – are proficient in these competencies.

The implementation plan for the 2016 OAG policy outlines CLSP as a process of continual learning for all staff in the system, both within professional development and in induction activities. It also calls for the support of curriculum, programs, and materials that allow for CLSP to be made operational where it truly matters – in schools and classrooms. Wrapped around this professional development and support follows a change to accountability systems for all stakeholders to be more attuned to CLSP. New “look-fors” in teacher, principal, and other staff evaluations; changes to our school quality measures; and new measures of partner quality are just a few of the ways in which CLSP has or will be incorporated. CLSP is also a foundational part of the district’s overall instructional vision, Essentials for Instructional Equity.<sup>8</sup>

Helping to lead this charge in capacity building across the district is the director of cultural proficiency, Hayden Frederick-Clark, who has created and coordinated content and support for central office, partners, schools leaders, parents, and the community around CLSP. This curriculum included a series of professional learning for all school leaders during the 2016-2017 school year focused on the constructs of race and bias, preparing them to begin to lead the work at their schools in the 2017-2018 school year. Frederick-Clark and I also helped to support the crafting of school-specific CLSP Goals, which are connected to the instructional focus and Quality School Plan for each and every school in the district.

One challenge we have encountered in the work is the capacity to support schools that range across a continuum, from those that are just starting the

work to those that have been intentional about race, bias, culture, and equity for years. School leaders will continue to need different levels of support and expertise.

To mitigate some of these challenges in readiness, we have held consultancies with individual school leaders and their teams in the spring and summer to create their plans of continual CLSP learning that complement key focus areas in their schools. During the school year, we are meeting regularly with instructional superintendents (coaches/supervisors of principals) to get notes from the field and bolster their ability to support schools. We have also provided mini-grants for schools and are currently commissioning a study to examine where and in what populations race and culture might be a barrier to teachers building authentic relationships with students (key knowledge for competency #2 in the CLSP Continuum). With that information, we will be able to better direct our services as a district to where there is teacher need.

### **CLSP AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL: SNOWDEN INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL**

Eugene Roundtree has spent over a decade as an educator in BPS and is in his third year as a principal at Snowden International School at Copley. Roundtree notes that the district’s push around CLSP has given leverage to many core underpinnings of great instruction.

The district-wide focus on CLSP competencies and the accompanying structures have put a compulsory nature to cultural proficiency . . . not just solely relying on you as a school leader to cultivate a coalition of the willing or trying to finesse outdated  
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<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/6648>.

structures to create urgency. . . . The mandatory CLSP SMART goal for the building has put the work front and center.

As part of the school’s professional development, Roundtree’s staff participate in Race Dialogues, a program run by YW Boston<sup>9</sup> that leads participants through conversations about race and ends in a racial equity action plan created by the group.

“We are trying to get out of a culture of normalizing failure and getting all staff to be less inclined to point the finger primarily at the students and be more reflective of their own practices.”

– Eugene Roundtree, principal,

Snowden International School at Copley

This is a beginning to normalizing conversations around race and equity as a staff and get to some underlying assumptions and attitudes that may trickle down and become barriers in the classroom. The way the [OAG] is framing the work as a “continuous cycle” is an indicator that this practice will not be going away in the near future.

Roundtree and his staff have already started making concrete changes to structures and programming at Snowden.

Staff will continue examining their curriculum using the 7 Forms of Bias

protocol<sup>10</sup> and we will have a building-wide book study during our CPT (common planning time) on *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (Hammond 2015) – in hopes that teachers see the interdependence among pedagogy, curriculum, and the relationships with and backgrounds of the students.

Even with this leverage and momentum, Roundtree speaks to the challenges of differing levels of buy-in and pushback.

We are trying to get out of a culture of normalizing failure and getting all staff to be less inclined to point the finger primarily at the students and be more reflective of their own practices. The lack of student progress is, in fact, partly due to the nature of the relationships between students and staff and some of the structures in the building. . . . There is a lot of pushback around the mindset work, and there is even more when we try to change actual conditions and policies.

Roundtree spoke about some school-wide policies that have been hot button issue that underscore these tensions, including teachers’ grades (overly weighting elements such as homework), the “no D” policy (if students do not get a C they fail), and a “no hats” policy, which create unnecessary conflict between staff and students while overly valuing compliance to teacher-created cultural norms.

To support his leadership direction and justify taking targeted action, Roundtree is leaning on data.

We are beginning to be intentional about giving more supports to our Black and Latino young men. . . . When you disaggregate our data,

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<sup>9</sup> See [www.ywboston.org/](http://www.ywboston.org/).

<sup>10</sup> For more information, see <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B5Q4XDpkAw74MERNRV9GempDek0/view>.

they are the subgroups least likely to be successful at our school in multiple measures. . . . One way we are doing this is through deepening our commitment to programs such as 10 Boys.

## THE 10 BOYS INITIATIVE

Ultimately, we hope CLSP will not only help educators to critically reflect on their biases and relationships in the context of their instruction, but also enable schools to support the development of socio-political consciousness of their students, who then can be the agents of change and problem solvers of the future. One of the vanguards of this work is the co-author of this article, Mwalimu Donkor Issa, director of targeted programming in OAG and manager of the 10 Boys Initiative,<sup>11</sup> which focuses on the empowerment of Black and Brown young men. More than 2,000 young men in grades 4 through 12 have been involved in 10 Boys in the past five years, and in 2017, the program served young men in over thirty schools in BPS.

The 10 Boys Initiative was created two decades ago by a former Boston principal, Ingrid Carney, who wanted to be of service to young men of color who were at risk of becoming truant at her school.

**MWALIMU DONKOR ISSA:** The program encourages belief in one’s own ability that is activated through a balance of collectivism and self-determination. Each cohort works through five core types of experiences: academic rigor, physical challenges, tutoring, community service, and “real talk.”<sup>12</sup>

By creating cohorts of young men who cooperate and collaborate in school and beyond, schools like Snowden are working to create intelligent, goal-oriented leaders – our young Kings.<sup>13</sup> The cohort approach also helps students feel attached to school as a supportive community that recognizes their individuality and cares about and promotes their success.

## SUSTAINING THE COMMITMENT

Boston’s commitment to weaving cultural proficiency into the fabric of policy and practice throughout the district and its schools, while relatively new, has gained considerable momentum. In this short piece, we have touched on changes at the district level, with the CLSP framework and supports; the school level, with the example of Snowden, a school that has embraced CLSP; and the student level, with the example of the 10 Boys Initiative. But in a large system, with varying degrees of understanding and buy-in, we see and expect pushback. We must have the courage to work through resistance, build capacity, and hold ourselves accountable for these changes.

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- 11 See <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib07/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/2218/About%2010%20Boys%20Initiative.pdf>.
- 12 “Real Talk” refers to session between the young men and the facilitator where the young men get to drive the conversation based on what they are grappling with in their real-time, lived experience inside or outside of the school context.
- 13 For more about the use of the term “Kings” for young African American men, see the article by Chatmon and Gray in *VUE* no. 42 at <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/42>.

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## Fixing Systems, Not Kids: Changing the Narrative of Black Males in Guilford County Schools

BARRY BRINKLEY, ERIC HINES, AKISHA JONES, EFFIE G. McMILLIAN,  
BROOKSIE STURDIVANT, AND MONICA WALKER

*In Guilford County (NC), the district aimed to change adults' beliefs and practices, rather than "fix" boys of color, by improving relationships between teachers and students and addressing implicit bias among educators, working in two areas: early literacy and discipline policies.*

Considerable research on African American males (AAMs) in American schools over the past ten years shows that they are underrepresented in every positive

measure of educational outcomes, and overrepresented in every negative measure. Many educators have developed low expectations, deficit thinking, and implicit biases toward

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AAMs and their capacity to behave appropriately and achieve academically. Tyrone Howard (2014), in his groundbreaking book, *Black Male(D)*, echoes W.E.B. Dubois’s question, “How does it feel to be a problem?”

In this article, the authors discuss how Guilford [North Carolina] County Schools is shedding light on and addressing these issues.

ERIC HINES: What struck me the most as I visited our schools was how little contact, regard, and relationship teachers exhibited with some students, predominantly AAMs. When I received requests from schools to come to their campuses to provide support and mentoring to a struggling AAM, I would ask the student who among the staff or teachers he felt he could go to when he was feeling anxiety or stress. The answer, all too often, was, “No one.” They described being viewed as not possessing any intellect, and as a result, they had begun to internalize these feelings.

## THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE INITIATIVE

In 2012, the district launched its African American Male Initiative and began to ask tough questions: “What are our pedagogical approaches, and are they relevant for this population? How do we relate to these young men, and do they believe that we believe in them?” These questions can be troubling for educators who have been amply trained to deliver what they believe is good instruction, but who are ill-equipped to address race, class, culture, and gender. For AAMs, relationships and perceptions matter as much as pedagogy – perhaps far more than we ever imagined. Howard (2014) argues that schools as social

structures and institutions have their own culture, norms, and ideologies at work that affirm certain identities, yet silence and marginalize others. AAMs face clear biases disfavoring both their race and gender.

The AAM initiative had two major goals: improve AAMs’ reading achievement in grades K–3 through early literacy work, and reduce disparities in discipline referrals and suspensions, since AAMs received suspensions at a rate four to five times higher than that of White males.

Unlike the many initiatives that aim to “fix” Black males, Guilford County Schools has focused on larger, systemic issues related to educator biases and inequitable practices that marginalize AAMs in particular, such as subjective discipline referrals for non-compliance and failure to use active engagement strategies that encourage participation. Staff at each of the district’s schools received a two-day anti-racism training that provided a historical analysis of race and culture and its impact on the well-being of families in the Guilford community. The workshop invited teachers to explore systemic oppression of racial minorities and understand how much of what AAMs experience has little to do with their gumption and grit and more to do with policies and circumstances beyond their control.

## THE EARLY LITERACY INITIATIVE: FINDING CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS FOR DISENGAGEMENT

The district hired one of the authors (Effie McMillian) as an early literacy coordinator for African American males in six pilot schools. During literacy instruction, McMillian noticed that some AAMs were engaged and

motivated to participate during reading activities, while others were disengaged.

**EFFIE MCMILLIAN:** I observed numerous AAMs who struggled with tracking text while the teacher read aloud. Then, when the teacher would ask students to continue reading the next paragraph or page independently, I saw AAMs who would sit quietly and stare at the page. When asked a recall question, many were unable to provide an answer.

The failure to efficiently decode words, read fluently, and increase vocabulary through classroom-wide reading could lead to difficulty with reading and comprehending grade-level text independently.

### Building Meaningful Student-Teacher Relationships

McMillian guided her daily work with the mantra, “You can’t teach them unless you can reach them.” She knew that to build bridges, change narratives, and impact outcomes, teachers would have to get to know their AAMs by building meaningful personal relationships. She noticed the limited stories on the walls of the school, and their lack of reflection of the student population. She facilitated monthly professional learning communities (PLCs) with teachers in grades K-3 at the six schools. One of the leading questions became, “If there were no students in the building and a stranger walked through, would he or she know who learns here?”

### Sharing Data for New Insights and Strategies

As they embarked on the journey to improve early literacy among AAMs, PLCs conducted deep data dives in which they examined students’ early literacy data to identify strengths and

root causes of deficits, and to discuss various explicit multi-sensory literacy strategies. As McMillian began to engage more with students and staff during weekly site visits, their stories gave her insight on students’ culture, literacy needs, and interests, and these understandings helped frame many PLCs and coaching conversations around how to build relationships, engage AAMs, and affirm their reader/writer identity. One teacher reflects,

Prior to the initiative, I included a lot of journal writing and discussion. . . . I began to include more visual aids, hands-on learning, and opportunities for brain breaks, which made the lessons more engaging.

Another teacher shares how the PLCs and professional development helped her get to know her AAM students:

There was one student in particular who needed extra motivation, and I was not able to make a connection with him in class. I decided to attend his basketball games [at] the local recreation center. He also sang in his church choir, so I attended one of their “sangings.” By attending his extracurricular events, I became aware of the vernacular in his community that was unique and valuable. . . . I was able to understand him and his family through a different lens. As a result, he also saw me in a different way. I was able to engage him better during class lessons once he saw me as one who cared. . . . Our relationship developed to a point where he did not want to let me down.

McMillian made extensive efforts to enhance the capacity of the elementary school teachers to teach phonics and address fluency through the adoption of a system-wide phonics program and culturally relevant texts. She and the

district’s curriculum and instruction staff also worked to align DIBELS data<sup>1</sup> and district unit assessments with literacy programs, such as Foundations,<sup>2</sup> that offered qualitative and quantitative insights into students’ skill sets and interests.

Many teachers and students began to set achievement goals after each benchmark assessment and conferenced between testing windows to monitor progress.

### Results: Less Labeling, More Academic Achievement

Two of the authors, Brooksie Sturdivant, the district’s equity coach specialist, and Effie McMillian, comment on the results of these efforts.

**BROOKSIE STURDIVANT:** As a result, many students began to notice teachers’ intentions to listen and assist rather than judge and dismiss.

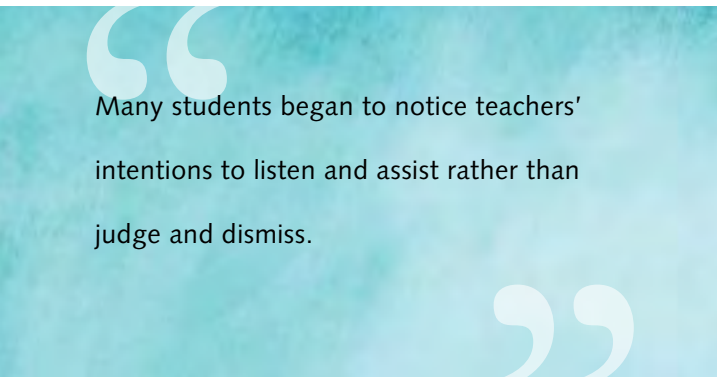
**EFFIE MCMILLIAN:** Teachers also worked more collaboratively, sharing strategies and providing interventions across classrooms and grade levels as they realized their capacity to intervene. At one school, teachers employed a strategy for enrichment and intervention at a consistent time during the instructional day called *Power Up Time*. What makes this approach uniquely effective and equitable is that it provides differentiated literacy instruction for all students based on need. The efforts minimized labeling and isolation, as all students went to their designated session simultaneously.

In 2016, the district’s Office of Accountability and Research evaluated the AAM initiative. Several schools’ data reflected increases in AAMs’ literacy development as measured by performance on DIBELS and end-of-grade reading assessments, closing the gap between performance of AAMs

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1 “Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) are a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade.” See <https://dibels.org/dibels.html>.

2 See <https://www.wilsonlanguage.com/programs/foundations/>.



Many students began to notice teachers’ intentions to listen and assist rather than judge and dismiss.

### Better Understanding Leads to More Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction

As teachers learned more about the cultures, interests, and literacy needs of AAMs within their classrooms, McMillian began to discuss the use of more culturally responsive literacy instruction and resources that promote active engagement. Teachers became more mindful of the diverse learning styles and more intentional when selecting texts to encourage AAM participation. Several teachers reported that as a result, they could better understand and relate to their students’ culture, interests, and ways of learning.

Data analysis also evolved. Each school incorporated a data wall or notebook, which allowed them to monitor individual students’ progress regularly and offer a more needs-based approach to interventions for those demonstrating below-grade-level expectations, and enrichment for those who were proficient. Teachers became motivated to track student growth to assess the effectiveness of their efforts.



and all other students and sustaining this performance throughout the initiative. DIBELS proficiency among AAMs in one school rose from 56 percent in 2013 to 68 percent in 2014. Although proficiency rates started to diminish when the work of the literacy coach shifted to service all elementary schools in 2014-2015, proficiency rates remain higher at this school in 2016 (62 percent) than at the beginning of the initiative, and higher than the comparison school in 2016 (48 percent). Ultimately, high expectations, quality instruction, targeted instructional supports, and, importantly, relationships were determining factors in achievement outcomes for AAMs in these schools and could prove promising in other contexts, as well.

### **THE DISCIPLINE INITIATIVE: CHALLENGING BELIEFS AND IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE**

The discipline initiative was piloted in three schools (elementary, middle, and high) in 2012 and extended to five high schools in 2013. Author Eric Hines, who was director of equity and inclusion, led the discipline initiative in schools and provided daily coaching to teachers who were experiencing challenges with classroom management.

#### **Unpacking the Biases behind “Non-Compliance” Infractions**

In these coaching sessions, administrators and teachers noticed that the overwhelming majority of classroom infractions resulted in a loss of instructional time for minor incidents deemed as non-compliant (e.g., insubordination, such as not removing their hats when asked, violating the standard mode of dress guidelines, or not relocating when asked). While the district’s Code of Conduct provides a frame for all

schools, principals have the autonomy to select the degree to which they will penalize students. Too often, those penalties are harsher for African American students, who represented 41 percent of students in 2014-2015, but 65 percent of discipline referrals. White students, in contrast, were 35 percent of students, but only 19 percent of referrals.

Hines worked to address mindsets and belief systems of administrators and teachers to improve classroom management and disciplinary practices and to foster a stronger connection between school and community. At one high school, out-of-school suspensions of the African American students fell into two primary infraction categories – standard mode of dress (SMOD) and cell phone usage – not egregious or violent acts. It became apparent that systemic policies, practices, and beliefs were the issue, not the students we serve.

#### **Implementing a More Equitable Approach to Discipline**

The high school principal and leadership team relaxed policies related to cell phone and SMOD and challenged teachers regarding their approaches to students who were out of compliance. A group of forty young men, the African American Male Advisory, were vehement in communicating their feelings of being policed, disrespected, and often provoked by teachers. Through professional development and PLCs, Hines shared equitable classroom practices, which encouraged teachers to reconsider school and classroom climate and establish a more welcoming learning environment. When they used equitable practices, such as greeting students at the door and asking students about their behaviors instead of rushing to judgment when behaviors were simply unfamiliar to them,

teachers were more mindful of respecting Black male students' personal space.

### Results: Fewer Referrals and Suspensions, Better School Relationships and Culture

The reduction in overall referrals, discretionary referrals, and suspension rates among AAMs at this school reflects the effectiveness of these changes in relationships. When student discipline data of initiative schools were compared to similar schools, the reduction in overall and discretionary referrals among AAMs was consistently greater than at comparison schools.

The 2016 evaluation by the Office of Accountability and Research concluded that concurrently with the reduction of discipline referrals and suspensions, the relationships among adults and students improved. The principal said:

What we're working on now is building more relationships, getting more awareness – culturally, ethnically, logistically, locations, geographical reasons – we're talking about all of those things now because we want teachers to understand that when building a relationship, you have to look at the complete student.

Overall, students felt that their teachers and counselors were more supportive and their relationships with teachers improved. Students frequently referred to school-level supports as “family” or family-type members (“like a father”; “she’s a mother figure”).

### LESSONS LEARNED

Key recommendations from our work are:

- Require that schools disaggregate all data in a way that allows schools to clearly see and examine outcomes for

AAMs. Incorporate into school routines regular data analysis and, based on that analysis, one-on-one coaching, professional development, and personalized student interventions.

- Make use of regular professional development with teachers and administrators to help them identify their hidden biases and behaviors and foster meaningful relationships with AAMs.

Challenges we experienced:

- Some teachers and some sectors of the community resisted the emphasis on AAMs, and some pilot schools that had small populations of AAMs were less engaged. Implicit bias and deficit thinking regarding AAM capacity led many teachers to blame students and their communities rather than adjust their practices to offer a more inclusive learning environment.
- Even with strategic planning in place, the district experienced policy changes and transitions in leadership during the initiative, accompanied by changing priorities and approaches – including a new literacy assessment, which affected data analysis efforts, and later, a new literacy curriculum. The abrupt expansion from six pilot schools to all sixty-nine elementary schools in the district also presented challenges.

### Moving Forward

As one of the initiative principals reflects, “The African American Male Initiative . . . gave us permission to prioritize their needs, and it helped us to question our work with them and our approaches.”

**EFFIE MCMILLIAN:** There were several major milestones over the course of the AAM Early Literacy

project, one of which included identifying teachers who demonstrated positive outcomes with AAMs. We selected a few to present their work to teachers across the district at our 2014-2015 AAM Summer Symposium. This further showed that the work was beginning to take hold, and teachers were excited to hear from other teachers.

In the words of Russell Bishop (2011), “It’s a serious business, education. It’s about caring for people, caring that they learn, and it’s about creating learning relationships so that you ensure they are able to learn.” The African American Male Initiative is

still alive and under way in Guilford County. Despite challenges and transitions, the work continues to focus on academic growth and eliminating the achievement gap between African American and other male students.

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## Transforming Belief Systems in Minneapolis

MICHAEL WALKER, COREY YEAGER, AND JENNIE ZUMBUSCH

*After getting input from parents and families, community members, educators, and young Black males themselves, the district launched a program to recruit Black men from the community as content experts, “cultural translators,” and adult role models to teach a class for Black boys.*

The Office of Black Male Student Achievement (OBMSA) of Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), established in 2014 under the direction of one of the authors (Michael Walker), is one of the first in the country, following the seminal work forged in Oakland Unified Schools.<sup>1</sup> The innovative work of the OBMSA<sup>2</sup> is centered on student voice

and student thought. In this article, we describe a portion of our journey as a family and – ultimately – a movement.

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- 1 For more on Oakland’s effort, see the article by Chatmon and Watson in this issue of *VUE*.
  - 2 For more information, see <http://blackmales.mpls.k12.mn.us/>.

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## WHO ARE OUR KINGS?

The OBMSA movement is in the “King building” business.<sup>3</sup> In line with our mission, the Kings of OBMSA are front and center as the leading voices in all we do. In our inaugural year, we created our cornerstone curriculum and class, B.L.A.C.K. (Building Lives Acquiring Cultural Knowledge),<sup>4</sup> with the support of Keith Mayes from the University of Minnesota.

Educators at four high schools and four middle schools selected students to take the daily class as an elective. One student in particular (let’s call him Rasheed) stands out. Rasheed’s backstory is sadly unremarkable for young men like him who suffer the trauma of being Black in the current American educational system. Rasheed was struggling in our school system, voiceless, and lacking any real advocates in his academic journey. He had unplugged from the educational system that had time and time again proven its disdain for him. Rasheed was labeled as a student with special needs, as are 30 percent of OBMSA Kings, compared with our district average of 17 percent. He was referred to B.L.A.C.K by his special education resource teacher.

The very first thing we do in each of our classes is share our autobiographies. Far too often, we dive quickly into content and curriculum without recognizing the humanity among us. Upon his entrance into our classroom, Rasheed let it be known that he was in no way interested in speaking out loud in the class, nor in sharing any of his personal journey. We respected his concerns, welcomed him into our family, and began to tell our stories – personal, raw, and emotional stories about what it was and is to be a Black man in this world.

Our goal is to “create family.” We seek to forge meaningful and genuine

relationships from the outset, seeing the relationship as the most important aspect of education and a prerequisite to learning. We, the adults, hope to become “uncles” to our Kings – not simply the all-knowledge-holding teachers, hoping to impart their content expertise upon students, but rather relatives who will walk this educational journey alongside our “nephews.”

Rasheed was having nothing to do with this relationship building. He told his teachers that he wanted out of our class and would not be sharing any of his personal journey. We convinced him to stay and listen as the other Kings shared their stories, and let him know that if he did not want to share, we would not force him. The metamorphosis began here. Rasheed listened to the stories of the classroom coach and his peers. He was moved that so many of the stories mirrored his experiences, both personally and educationally. On the third day of our autobiographies, Rasheed sheepishly raised his hand and asked if he could speak. He stated, with an emotional and tear-filled voice, that he had no intention of sharing, but that for the first time in his life, he felt compelled to be a part of something. As he told his story, Kings and coach alike were moved. We had become family.

Research shows that Black male students like Rasheed benefit greatly from having a Black male teacher and mentor. When students and teachers share the same race/ethnicity, there are academic benefits, because teachers “can serve as role models,

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<sup>3</sup> For more about the use of the term “Kings” for young African American men, see the article by Chatmon and Gray in *VUE* no. 42 at <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/42>.

<sup>4</sup> For an abstract of our course B.L.A.C.K., see [http://blackmales.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/b\\_l\\_a\\_c\\_k\\_abstract.pdf](http://blackmales.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/b_l_a_c_k_abstract.pdf)

mentors, advocates, or cultural translators” (Egalite, Kisida & Winters 2015). A new study from the Institute of Labor Economics also shows that Black primary-school students matched with a Black teacher gain both short- and long-term positive outcomes (Gershenson et al. 2017). Despite this evidence, the MPS teacher force is only 5 percent Black (and one percent Black male), while Black students make up 38 percent of the student body.

## THE LISTENING TOUR

From the outset, OBSMA sought to ensure that the voices of the people who were to be impacted were at the forefront of the decision making process. To make sure we had the right voices at the table, one of us (director Michael Walker), with the support of my team, set out on a 100-day listening tour with four key stakeholder groups in mind: parents and families, community members, educators, and the young Black males themselves.

The district’s initial plan for the listening tour followed the traditional course – inviting families and community members to our schools to share their perspective. However, I (Michael Walker) knew that approach would simply garner the same perspective as always – parents and families who were already used to plugging into the system and being heard. We needed to engage parents and families who had previously been disengaged and solicit their uncensored, raw feedback. I used my privilege of being a member of the community to go to local barbershops and hair salons, where you can hear truth, whether you like it or not. I knew that to make real change for our Black males, MPS needed to hear that truth.

On this listening tour, I developed six questions, which were adapted for each stakeholder group:

1. What would you like to see as the mission of OBSMA?
2. What has contributed to the success of your Black male son?
3. Who has influence over your Black male son today?
4. What are some of the challenges you are facing as a parent to support your Black male son?
5. What can MPS do better to support you, as a parent, and your Black male son?
6. As a community member or parent, how will you deem this office successful?

## WHAT EACH STAKEHOLDER GROUP BELIEVES

As we captured the conversations during the listening tour, we saw some patterns emerge about the beliefs of each stakeholder group.

*Parents* often believe they are not given enough credit for their involvement. They do not always show up at conferences or open houses, but that does not mean they are uninterested, uncommitted, or uninvolved. It usually means they are working, and taking time off could get their pay docked. It is also hard for parents to believe in a system that does not support, and has never supported, their needs, as parents or former students themselves. Our disproportionate suspensions and referral rates did not occur overnight – they have been years in the making. Our current parents, when they were students, may well have experienced trauma from these oppressive practices

that have deep roots within the educational system.

Many *educators* believe they do not have the skills, the tools, or the training to do their best with Black males in the classroom. In conversations, teachers have asked us about receiving professional development and specific training to bolster their effectiveness with this population. In one startling conversation, I heard an educator indicate that they do not believe in the young Black men at all.

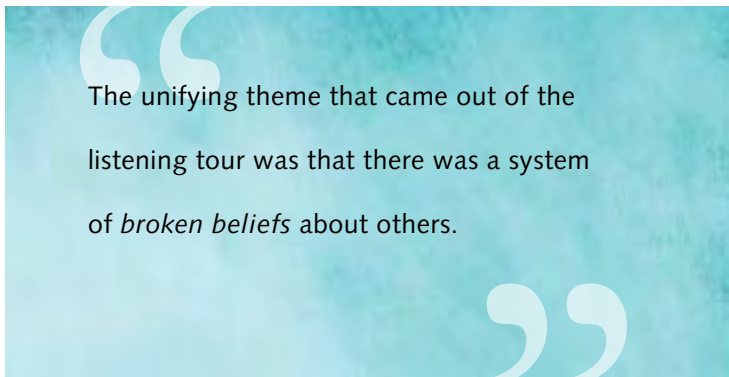
Various *community members* believe that a larger system works against our young Black men. They have become keenly aware of how the parts of the system fit together, how the young men are struggling to find their place, how the schools are struggling to manage, and how difficult it is for the parents to navigate the system. It was disheartening to hear the lack of confidence the community felt about our school system.

Countless *Black males* believe that they cannot be themselves at school. They perceive that a Black identity is incompatible with fitting in and being successful; they feel pressure to “act White” and “code switch” their language.

## **BROKEN BELIEFS AND THE BELIEF FRAMEWORK**

The unifying theme that came out of the listening tour was that there was a system of *broken beliefs* about others. Parents and families did not believe that the teachers were fair and equitable when it came to dealings with their Black males. The community did not believe that the educational system was serving all students. Educators did not believe that they had the tools necessary to support Black males in the classroom, and, in some

cases, they didn’t believe that they could be successful. Finally, Black males didn’t see academic success in their future. When we looked at our district-wide data on behavior, graduation rates, and standardized testing, it was clear how each of the



The unifying theme that came out of the listening tour was that there was a system of *broken beliefs* about others.

key stakeholders could justify its beliefs. We wondered if these broken beliefs may have found a home in many minds beyond Minneapolis.

This listening tour inspired me to develop a *Belief Framework*,<sup>5</sup> which formed the foundation for the work of OBMSA. Four key stakeholders – community, parents and families, educators, and Black male students – form the outer ring of the framework. They all need to believe in each other, which is why the arrows on the illustration are circular, having no beginning and no end. Their beliefs need to change and reinforce each other rather than work at odds as they currently do. Students need to believe in themselves. They also need the educators to believe in them. Parents need to believe in the educators. As the parents start to come around, as their beliefs change, the community at large will believe the system is working.

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5 See [http://blackmales.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/belief\\_framework.pdf](http://blackmales.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/belief_framework.pdf).

The inner quadrant houses the belief statements as an end goal. We hope to see parents believing that educators are fair-minded and equitable. We want the community to believe the educational system is serving us all. We want educators to believe that Black males are motivated to learn. Finally, we want the Black male students to believe that academic success is in their future.

Beliefs are often considered “squishy” and some readers may not feel comfortable with this approach, but beliefs change motivation, and motivation changes behavior (Dweck 2007). School districts and the key stakeholder groups these districts comprise must adopt and practice a consistent way of thinking, mindset, and language around the notion of achievement.

#### **HIRING THE TEACHERS THAT OUR KINGS ASKED FOR**

During the listening tour, Black male students stated unequivocally that they wanted more teachers who looked like them and who could understand their plight, as well as more opportunities to learn about their true history. This desire led my planning, considering the low percentage of Black teachers overall, and even lower percentage of Black male teachers. The second struggle would be creating a more Afrocentric curriculum that could bring forth a more relevant foundation for our Kings.

The next step in the process was finding Black male teachers for the course. From my perspective and experience within the educational system, I looked for teachers who not only were content experts, but who also could build strong, authentic

relationships with the Black male students in their classes.

Finding the people was fairly simple. The difficult part was getting them through the state’s Community Expert process to ensure that the course would be credit bearing. Minnesota statute 122A.25 allows districts or charter schools to hire a person with expertise to teach a particular course or subject area for which licensed teachers are unavailable. The person applies for a license that the district’s teachers union and the state board approve. The application can be a daunting task, depending on the leadership of the teachers union and their stance/philosophy on alternative teaching licenses. All parties must approve licenses annually.

In the first year of the course, everyone was on the same page, and each governing board approved OBMSA using Community Experts to deliver the B.L.A.C.K. curriculum. With a change of leadership at the teachers union, the second year was not as smooth. The new union leadership did not support the use of Community Experts. Fortunately for us, they still approved the alternative certifications that year.

#### **A BELIEF GAP, NOT AN ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

What is apparent from OBMSA’s work is that there is no such thing as an achievement gap, only a belief gap. For the past four years, the four community experts have been able to influence the academic trajectory of the approximately 200 Kings who are in their classes each year. We have seen an increase in grade point averages. The percentage of Black males who are



credit-ready for graduation is higher for students who have taken B.L.A.C.K., compared with those who have not taken our course.<sup>6</sup>

Let us revisit Rasheed. He joined our family with an abysmal 1.6 GPA and multiple discipline referrals and suspensions. By the final quarter of the school year, he received recognition as an A/B honor roll student and ended the year with no referrals or suspensions. His teachers praised his turnaround, and his mother described his transition as “simply amazing.” Rasheed found a school family and, in turn, discovered much about himself. At this writing, Rasheed is a senior in our program, holding steady with a 3.1 GPA, and is currently applying to colleges and universities.

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6 For a full version of the impact study we have completed on OBSMA using propensity score analysis, see [http://blackmales.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/obmsa\\_impact\\_study\\_2017.pdf](http://blackmales.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/obmsa_impact_study_2017.pdf).

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## My Brother's Keeper: Nurturing In-School Relationships for Young Men of Color in New York City

PAUL FORBES AND SARAH KLEVAN

*A program centered around the concept of Umoja (“unity”) highlights the importance of positive in-school relationships for young men of color and describes how those relationships help them to succeed in school and deal with trauma in their lives.*

On Saturday, October 15, 2016, Joseph Jimenez [JJ] was shot and killed on his way to his girlfriend’s house after a long day of work as a line cook at Applebee’s. Standing at 6 feet 2 inches, with a swaggering and loping gait, our young King<sup>1</sup> took four bullets to the head in a case of mistaken identity.

For many, JJ’s death was merely another nameless tally mark, another murder statistic that people will .....

<sup>1</sup> For more about the use of the term “Kings” for young African American men, see “Lifting Up Our Kings: Developing Black Males in a Positive and Safe Space” in *VUE* no. 42 at <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/42>.

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discuss as “very tragic.” For us, this particular tragedy involved one of our own young men, a student full of promise whom we had raised in our school community since he was ten years old and carried in our arms when his own best friend died in middle school.

– Excerpt from a memoriam written by UMOJA faculty leader Ingrid Chung

J’s death is an example of the heavy price that Black and Latino men pay for the structural inequities they face, such as higher rates of poverty, incarceration, and unemployment. New York City’s Young Men’s Initiative, a combination of new programs and policy reforms, seeks to mitigate some of the effects of these inequitable conditions on young men of color.

The educational component of this initiative, the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), developed by the New York City Department of Education (DOE), focused specifically on improving college and career readiness among Black and Latino male youth. Over four years, the DOE provided funding and other resources to forty high schools to develop programming in three key domains: college-going culture, youth development, and academics. Schools were given substantial flexibility in how they would implement programming within the three domains.

In this short piece, we focus on the most common change that schools reported as a result of implementing ESI: improved in-school relationships. We draw upon findings from the Research Alliance for New York City

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2 For more information, see [http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research\\_alliance/research/projects/esi\\_evaluation](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/research/projects/esi_evaluation).

School’s evaluation of the initiative<sup>2</sup> to discuss the importance and impact of these relationships.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF IN-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Positive in-school relationships, including those between students and staff and between students and their peers, contribute to overall success in school. For example, positive relationships between peers have been linked to improved student behavior, prevention of school dropout, and increased college going (Wells et al. 2011; Riegler-Crumb 2010; Haynie & Osgood 2005). Researchers have also found a significant association between the quality of student-teacher relationships and a range of positive student outcomes, including engagement in learning, academic expectations, and college enrollment (Hallinan 2008; Wells et al., 2011; Riegler-Crumb 2010).

Nurturing relationships may be particularly important for supporting male students. Research has indicated that generally, girls have closer relationships with their teachers and more academically oriented relationships with their peers than boys do (DiPrete & Buchmann 2013; Giordano 2003; Riegler-Crumb 2010; Wells et al. 2011; Hughes, Cavell & Wilson 2001). Furthermore, research on schools that achieve positive outcomes for Black and Latino males suggests that strong relationships between teachers and students are a crucial element of their success (Fergus, Noguera & Martin 2014).

A majority of ESI schools incorporated programming that emphasized the development of in-school relationships. For example, approximately half of the ESI schools implemented mentoring programs (either adult-student mentoring or peer mentoring) and over a quarter

of ESI schools implemented advisory programs (small classes in which students are able to openly discuss non-school issues in their lives). Additional programs aimed at building relationships were used in smaller numbers of ESI schools; these included visits to students' homes, field trips that incorporated rope courses and group challenges, and enrichment activities that allowed students and staff to spend time together outside of classroom settings.

About a quarter of ESI schools sought to nurture relationships by creating single-gender spaces. These spaces were designed to help students develop their leadership skills and to provide a forum for discussing issues of particular relevance to them, such as interacting with police and other authority figures, sexual health, and romantic relationships.

#### **THE UMOJA PROGRAM: LIFTING UP THE LEADERSHIP SKILLS OF YOUNG MEN OF COLOR**

One such program is UMOJA, referenced in the quote at the beginning of this article. UMOJA (Swahili for “unity”), is a male-empowerment program developed at the Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science (AMS). Ingrid Chung, who piloted the program, and her team identified the five lowest-performing young men in each grade (based on disciplinary incidents, attendance, lateness, and credit accumulation). Too often, the lowest-performing young men in schools are isolated and pushed out of the class and school community. Ingrid was convinced that these young men would be better served if they were “pulled in” rather than “pushed out.” Her belief was that by bringing them together and allowing them to get to know each other, they would

learn to trust and support each other. Twenty young men were invited to participate, and thirteen agreed to join UMOJA. While most of these young men did not know each other prior to UMOJA, some had previously served long-term suspensions due to physical altercations that they had had with one another.

Previously, at the beginning of the year, AMS would take classes to upstate New York on a community-building camping trip. However, this was the first time that a gender-based trip of students spanning the high school grades occurred. A trip like this had never been attempted at AMS; Ingrid and her team were apprehensive, especially about the potential interpersonal dynamics between the students. However, they were certain that with support and an opportunity for pro-social bonding moments, these young men could develop into school leaders.

For a week in August, the young men participated in morning hikes, games, and team-building activities. They cooked and ate together. They were given the space to discuss their lives outside of school and, sometimes, they cried together. Ingrid and her team created a rare opportunity for these students to let their guard down and allow each other into their lives. By giving space for and tapping into the natural leadership skills of these young men – their ability to communicate with each other, take responsibility for their actions, and provide constructive feedback – the adult and student participants were able to create a safe space in which a sense of love, community, and brotherhood was developed.

One of us [Paul Forbes, senior director of ESI], met the young men at the end of the trip. I could not believe that these young men were considered “low-performing” or “at risk.” The

same young men who would yell, scream, and fight to resolve conflict were now sitting in a circle and talking about the issues that bothered them. The same young men who started the week not trusting anyone were committing to be “my brother’s keeper.” After a week, they were able to make a commitment to honor themselves and each other.

UMOJA is now in its third year and continues to serve approximately twenty young men annually. (In the second year, a comparable program, NIA, or “purpose” in Swahili, was launched for girls.) The UMOJA program continued to seek out the young men who needed the most support, and began to consider more teacher recommendations. The participants meet every Tuesday after school for bonding opportunities and again on Saturdays for academic support. During UMOJA, the young men come together for counseling sessions, to share their experiences and build relationships, and to attend race and justice workshops. During these workshops, UMOJA participants learn that their voices not only matter – their voices are *essential* to transform the fractured world that they will inherit.

### HOW MENTORING PROGRAMS LIKE UMOJA BUILD POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Three years after the initial camping trip Ingrid had planned for the first UMOJA cohort, I [Paul Forbes] asked her to describe what makes the UMOJA program special. She explained,

It is our belief that through authentic relationships with adult mentors . . . peer mentorship, and brotherhood, and a fierce sense of belonging, we can transform these boys’ experiences of high school, and in turn, their futures. . . .

Our young men [have learned] that brotherhood includes [being responsible] to one another. During the school year, the young men now hold each other accountable for coming to school on time; making smart decisions both inside and outside of school; submitting work and homework on time; and consistently demonstrating the qualities of an UMOJA leader.

As at AMS, educators at many other ESI schools saw the initiative as an opportunity to nurture in-school relationships. In the Research Alliance evaluation of ESI’s implementation, we interviewed nearly 500 teachers, administrators, and students about their ESI experience. Improved relationships among students and between students and school staff was a ubiquitous theme across all four years of the initiative and was the most common response when interviewees were asked to reflect upon changes at their schools as a result of ESI. Over half of the ESI schools reported improved relationships between teachers and students, as well as between students and their peers. One teacher discussed the impact of having the opportunity to spend more time with the male students at her school:

I would just say from my personal experience, having the ability to have a class with tenth grade boys or young men, it’s affected the way I view them. . . . Through meeting with them twice a week I get to connect and communicate with them on a more candid level. . . . We actually get to talk about a lot of things that they probably wouldn’t talk to a teacher about on a normal basis. I think it’s affected how quickly I’ve been able to immerse myself and to feel comfortable with the students.

## HOW POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS LEAD TO OTHER POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Educators in ESI schools also saw improved relationships as an important antecedent to other positive outcomes such as school retention and peer accountability. A principal credited the strong relationships that his staff and students developed over the course of ESI for the school's high student retention:

They're still here because we have . . . good trusting relations, so they [students] can come to talk to you, relate to you in a way where they don't feel threatened or feel . . . they'll be pushed off.

In focus groups with students, Black and Latino young men also expressed how important their relationships with teachers were. One student shared:

Sophomore year I had to get surgery. . . . I was out for a month of school. [All three staff members] would constantly check up on me and see how I was doing. It just goes to show that these guys cared about me. . . . This program teaches you how to be compassionate for other people. . . . To have these guys every day that I came to school just made me want to come to school that much more because I got to be with my brothers.

Many of the young men we spoke with described the relationships that they developed with one another as extremely significant. Reflecting on his participation in a peer mentorship program, one student shared the big impact for him of developing close relationships that felt like a family:

I recommend this program to all of my friends. . . . I feel like when you join, you meet people and you learn about people from their experiences. . . . You grow as a person with this program. . . . I think we grew as a brotherhood. I think it goes for everybody that we grew a friendship that can last for a lifetime.

In addition to data collected through interviews and focus groups in ESI schools, the Research Alliance's ESI evaluation drew on a survey administered to students annually in thirty-eight of the ESI schools and between fifteen and twenty-seven comparison schools (depending on the year, from 2013 through 2016). The survey captured students' participation in various activities related to ESI's key domains,<sup>3</sup> as well as measures of critical thinking, academic self-concept, sense of fair treatment, perception of school race and cultural climate, and sense of belonging in school.

Analysis of our survey results indicates that ESI had a positive impact on Black and Latino young men's sense of fair treatment and sense of belonging in their schools in grades 11 and 12. We hypothesize that the shifts in key in-school relationships as a result of ESI programs such as UMOJA led to these positive impacts. Considering how alienating schools can be for young men of color (Fergus, Noguera & Martin 2014), these findings on the ways in which schools can create welcoming, nurturing environments for Black and Latino young men are an important contribution to the broader discussion around improving academic outcomes for this segment of the student population.

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3 College-going culture, youth development, and academics: see the introductory section of this article.

## LOVE, COMMUNITY, AND BROTHERHOOD IN THE FACE OF TRAGEDY

JJ, who was described in the introductory section of this piece, was one of the original UMOJA leaders. He was tragically murdered just over a year after he graduated from AMS. I [Paul Forbes] went to AMS the day after JJ was killed to visit and mourn with the other UMOJA leaders. I left the school with the same sense of awe that I had when I met the UMOJA leaders three years earlier, after their initial camping trip. Their sense of love, community, and brotherhood endured and was evident in the ways that they held and supported one another through the experience of losing JJ, their friend and brother. Grief counselors were sent to the school from the central and district office. While there were students in the school community who went to meet with them, the UMOJA brothers and I sat in the corner of the room mourning and laughing together. These young men, brothers and Kings, truly embodied the quality of *umoja* – unity – even in the face of loss and tragedy.

No program can compensate for the death of a young man like JJ, nor can any program single-handedly eradicate the appalling injustices that young men of color face every day of their lives. But the enduring solidarity and leadership that these young men have developed in the UMOJA program fills us with hope for the future – not only for our individual Kings, but for our schools and our communities.

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# Using Data to Guide Difficult Conversations around Structural Racism

LESLI C. MYERS AND KARA S. FINNIGAN

*The superintendent and an education researcher in Rochester (NY) present a framework for grounding difficult conversations on race and implicit bias in system-level data, to avoid blaming and shaming and to break through defensiveness to arrive at solutions.*

Challenging and confronting educational systems and structures, the vast majority of which come from a place of privilege, is uncomfortable but necessary. Education, from early childhood to post-secondary, should challenge and address the racial inequities that inevitably characterize such systems and structures. Yet, we do not always do this explicitly, for a number of reasons.

First, this is hard work, and educators must deal with many pressing needs on a day-to-day basis, so difficult conversations about racial inequities are pushed to the sidelines. Second, many educators do not have the training or resources available to collect, access, or analyze their data with a critical lens around racial equity. Third, many educators are White, and therefore have not personally

experienced what it means to navigate interactions that are based upon racial biases or systems of structural racism. Without this firsthand knowledge, they may not be aware of the impact on youth outcomes – from disengagement to academic challenges – and the critical need to address these systemic issues. Even educators of color, within a system that privileges Whiteness, can struggle with internalized oppression or the same lack of tools and training as White teachers. If we are to authentically serve all of our students – particularly Black and Latino males – it is important that we are open to having tough conversations about race.

The authors of this article are an example of how educators can collaborate around diversity and racial equity. We are in some ways opposites, but the difference actually helps us to have a greater understanding of these

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issues. We are a Black woman and a White woman; a school district superintendent and a university professor; a practitioner and a researcher; a woman who does not have children and a mom; a counselor and a policy analyst. What enables us to work together so well is that we have deep respect for each other, are open to new ways of thinking that emerge from our joint work, and are committed to racial justice. We work in parallel on these issues, in practice and in research, and when the opportunity arises (like writing this article), we enthusiastically collaborate.

One ongoing collaboration is through the Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer Program (USITP), in the Rochester, New York, area, that allows students to move across district boundaries for desegregation. We recently wrote about how educational leaders can help promote inclusivity in schools, based upon the results of a research partnership between the University of Rochester and the USITP governance board (Finnigan et al. 2015). We found that students who crossed boundaries from the city school district to the primarily White suburban districts experienced:

- racial stereotyping from individual students, teachers, security staff, and other school staff;
- negative portrayals of their neighborhoods as violent and unsafe; and
- institutional and structural racism nested in the policies and programs of the suburban districts.

Our analysis led us to three steps to disrupt these experiences of students of color in our educational systems – not just those who move across boundaries, but all students. The first step is “confronting race” through targeted conversations that use data relating to achievement, discipline, and climate, for instance, by focusing on differential

outcomes for Black and Latino males. These conversations can become uncomfortable when educators who accept these outcomes as normal are asked to reflect critically on systemic factors.

To ensure equity is embedded in our school systems, we must also move beyond these difficult conversations with two further steps that are beyond the scope of this article: targeting professional development and training around cultural competence, and aligning beliefs around equity, policies, and practices. In this short piece, we will focus on the first step – preparing the way for bringing about change by sparking meaningful conversations around racial prejudice and structural racism.

## USING DATA AS A STARTING POINT

Data-driven decision making (DDDM) is linked to broader research on organizational learning and continuous improvement and traces back to debates of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Marsh, Pane & Hamilton 2006). Several scholars have developed frameworks for DDDM,<sup>1</sup> based on a learning process that Argyris and Schön (1996) refer to as “double-loop learning,” which involves reflection and suspension of deeply held beliefs and consideration of alternative views and practices. DDDM has not explicitly focused on racial equity, but this area of work provides strong guidance as to a process to use to move forward.

Data can help school staff see that current problems occur at a systemic level and produce clearly visible inequitable results, making it harder for individuals to insist that there is no problem because they are “not racist”

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail and references about DDDM, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

or feel that they are being unfairly singled out and blamed. Teasing out the mechanisms by which these inequitable results happen can unearth assumptions and racial biases that improve understanding rather than blame and shame.

Data can include local and state assessment data, attendance, suspension rates, classification rates, enrollment numbers, AP scores, graduation rates, course taking, surveys of parents or students, and a variety of other data available in school systems. Sometimes an initial analysis reveals that additional data are needed (e.g., surveys or interviews of teachers or counselors, observations, or interviews with students). Essential questions to ask are:

- What data sources are already available to us, and how do we obtain these data?
- What types of data do we need to collect?
- Are any of these rates (attendance, graduation, etc.) disproportionate by race?
- What analysis will we need to do and does our staff have the skills and knowledge to do this or will we need to contract with an outside group?
- Who will be involved in the discussions?
- What problem or issue are we looking to solve?
- How will we use the results?

Using data as a starting point can help in a number of ways. It can sound the alarm on specific areas of concern. It can encourage dialogue that challenges existing practices and points toward solutions. A reflective and critical conversation around race might lead educators to uproot sacred cows – things that have always been a certain way, despite the unequal outcomes they

produce. For example, discussions around data that indicate unequal access to gifted and talented programs can often result in reflection and policy change around eligibility requirements, recommendation procedures, and other related areas. Statements like, “But we have always had teachers recommend students for gifted and talented” can be questioned by looking at data that may suggest how teacher recommendations are one component of the process that causes unequal access, which may lead to a consideration of alternative eligibility requirements or mechanisms. Using data as a starting point can also call attention to areas of improvement in the data systems and ways to ensure that more useful data are available for future analyses.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

A critical component of these discussions is trusting relationships:

At the heart of forming trusting relationships is the ability to be vulnerable and share, to show respect for others’ ideas, and to learn from the knowledge that others bring to an organization. Both innovation and improvement require risk taking and idea sharing, but underlying emotional connections are critical in helping the technical aspects of work to take hold. (Finnigan & Daly 2017, p. 29).

In difficult conversations like the ones described in this article, a key component was establishing a base of trust and grounding problem solving around inequitable opportunities or outcomes rather than assigning blame. This is consistent with prior work around the importance of trust for school improvement (see, for example, Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The current climate of high-stakes accountability can work

against the types of trusting relationships that are necessary to move forward. But superintendents and school administrators must find ways to model and foster collaborative and trusting relationships among staff by assuring staff that these conversations will be used for inquiry, not evaluation; establishing a norm of respect for different views and perspectives; and working with staff to carefully pull back the layers of a problem and determine a plan for meaningful change.

### THE ERASE FRAMEWORK: USING DATA TO GUIDE CONVERSATIONS AROUND STRUCTURAL RACISM

To address racism and bias in a meaningful and authentic way requires educators to have candid conversations about and with the students they are responsible for serving, which may create discomfort and resistance among school staff. How can we move from a place of tension and defensiveness and ensure that all school stakeholders are involved?

District leaders must first demonstrate that addressing racial prejudice and systemic racism is a district-wide priority that must be carried out in practice. The superintendent must work with the board of education to create policies that clearly outline the expectation. Central office and school administrators then develop regulations to outline how the policy will operate in each school. Teachers and parents must be included in this process to ensure buy-in and to bring in their knowledge and perspectives. Students are also critical to these discussions – both students of color and White students, as both groups notice that they are treated differently by educators, with students of color more likely to be punished for similar behaviors (Lewis & Diamond 2015). This district-wide priority must be clearly delineated in

the mission, vision, and strategic plan of the district.

Our experiences from practice and research suggest that having a framework may help school or district leaders as they undergo this learning process. Here we offer a framework to start conversations that **ERASE** racial prejudices and structural racism, building upon the DDDM and organizational learning processes mentioned earlier:<sup>2</sup>

1. **Examine data.** Start with available data around student opportunities and outcomes and disaggregate these along racial lines. Produce data sets and visual representations (e.g., infographics) of data that can generate rich discussions.
2. **Raise questions.** Begin with open questions of participants around what they notice and why they think differential outcomes exist, to fully understand the ways that racial prejudices and structural racism impact youth. Allow for questioning of deeply held beliefs or assumptions to bring different perspectives and experiences into the dialogue.
3. **Ascertain root causes, relevant best practices, and alternative research-based solutions.** This can be one of the most difficult steps as it moves from identifying red flag areas to diagnosing problem and identifying meaningful solutions. Look systematically at available research and best practices targeted at the root causes identified through this analysis to ensure that the scope of possibilities are known and discussed.

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2 As noted in the introduction, professional development and training in cultural competence and to challenge deficit-based beliefs are necessary components and should be part of this district-wide priority to provide an environment in which these conversations can take place.

4. **Select strategic solutions.** At this point it is important to prioritize both short-term and long-term strategies. These may include additional training or hiring of staff; alteration of policies or procedures or development of new policies; identification of new data to collect; development of new programs for students; or revisiting of strategic plans or vision statements of the district.
5. **Evaluate progress.** Re-examining the data sets periodically and making adjustments to policy and practices are necessary to ensure that the issues that are identified through these conversations are addressed. It is also important to celebrate even the smallest of successes.

## USING DATA TO SPARK CONVERSATIONS AIMED AT CREATING CHANGE

In the following two examples, I [Lesli Myers] share my experiences as an administrator in two different school districts to describe how I used data to spark difficult conversations about race. These examples informed our joint thinking and the development of the ERASE framework.

### Example 1: Using Data to Spark Conversations with Students

Several years ago, I was working in a school district that was experiencing significant turmoil. Fights were prevalent and the atmosphere was so charged that the Department of Justice came in to mediate some of the challenges and difficulties that the community was facing. Black and Brown students and their families would regularly complain to staff about inequity and unfair treatment.

On a fall day, I was sitting at my desk and was notified that hundreds of students had organized a walkout and were protesting outside of the high school. My presence was requested to help determine what was going on. After a few short conversations with the protesters, I was able to identify who the student organizers were and asked if we could have a discussion about the situation. After a promise that I would do much more listening than talking, the students reluctantly agreed to stop protesting and meet with me in the cafeteria in the high school.

For two and a half hours, I sat and listened to Black, Brown, and rural students talk about their educational experiences and interactions in their schools. For example, one student emphatically shared that he received a discipline consequence for lingering in the hallway past the ringing of the bell while the White student with him received a verbal reprimand. Another student was angered that he overheard an administrator speaking about his behavior and it was mentioned that this was a “generation issue” because his father behaved in the same manner. During the meeting I heard words such as *discrimination*, *harassment*, *privilege*, *inequality*, and *injustice*. I inwardly cried as I wrote over twenty pages of handwritten notes and regularly conducted checks for understanding to ensure I was accurately capturing their lived experiences.

One of the major themes that emerged<sup>3</sup> involved unequal treatment of students in discipline decisions, expectations, and suspensions. In response, I created a student discipline review panel that provided a vehicle for students to

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3 I applied a simple qualitative analysis to my notes on the students’ statements, using open coding to identify distinct concepts and categories and assign first-level concepts into second-level categories.

review and analyze discipline data (race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, grade level, infraction and outcome), and provide feedback on the code of conduct, which was a key policy impacting disciplinary outcomes.

Because trust was an issue with many students, I was the only adult who attended the student discipline review panel meetings. I entered the meetings with the hope and expectation that having students look at data would provide an additional lens with a unique perspective. I showed students a bar graph of the disaggregated discipline data, outlined the discipline process, and gave them a glossary. The students broke into groups of four; I asked them to begin by simply looking at the data. Next, I had students ask questions of the data (e.g., what were the number of student subgroups?) and identify the key findings. Were there any numbers or percentages that stood out or raised concern? Then they identified areas for improvement (what immediately “sounded the alarm” for the group?) and, based on their analysis, recommended action for how we – as a district – could improve our school discipline policies to address the inequitable results they found.

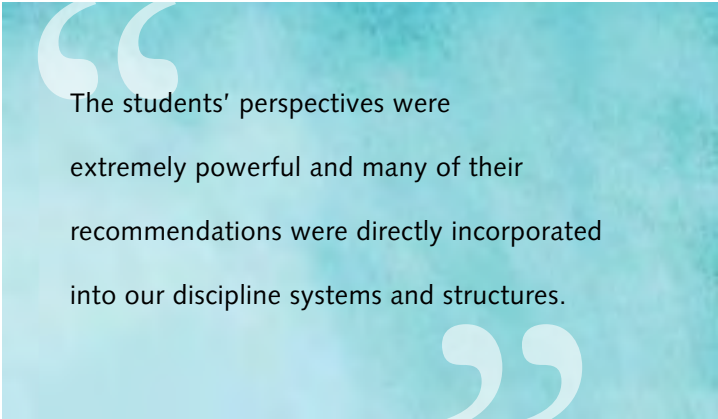
These conversations with students were relatively easy, since the students were invested, inquisitive, and genuinely interested in the analysis and the dialogue. Their perspectives were extremely powerful and many of their recommendations were directly incorporated into our discipline systems and structures.

It was more difficult to engage in these discussions with the adult staff as a follow-up to the students’ analyses. But having the students take this first step facilitated rich discussions with the adults as they heard about how students had grappled with these issues in an authentic and constructive way.

Outcomes of this powerful interaction included sharing the information with the board of education and each school principal, modifications to the code of conduct, modifications to the equity mentor program, and new professional development for administrative staff.

### Example 2: Using Data to Spark Conversations with Teachers, Counselors, Principals, and other School Staff

At the end of each year, schools and districts usually review data around academics, behavior, dropout rates, attendance, and athletic participation, among other areas. This end-of-year review provides the opportunity to see if student, teacher, and school benchmarks have been met, and also allows educators to identify problem areas that require attention for the upcoming year. Recently, my district reviewed our data on in- and out-of-school suspensions. We disaggregated



The students’ perspectives were extremely powerful and many of their recommendations were directly incorporated into our discipline systems and structures.

the information along the following categories: race, socio-economic status, grade level, school, consequence, and time of year. Administrators at both the school and district level were involved in the conversation, including

assistant principals, principals, assistant superintendents, and the superintendent.

An overarching agreement was made that wherever the data led, we would focus on solutions rather than on blaming particular people or schools. What we wanted was to have meaningful conversations about why certain students were overrepresented in a particular category. We shared our key findings, which included inconsistent penalties and longer out-of-school time for students of color, then opened the discussion with questions like, What specific data points immediately jumped out on the page? Participants asked why, who, what, when, where, and how: for example, Why were so many African American males getting suspended during a particular time of day or in a particular location of the school?

Conversations such as these began with system-level data, but sometimes led to specific situations like the relationship between a particular educator and student. One outcome of the conversations was to institute a “member check conversation” when a request is made to suspend a student for five days. The principal outlines the situation in a call to a central office administrator, who can ask clarifying questions or push for additional information. This extra step allows decisions to be made with other perspectives and other ways of approaching the situation to be considered, which alleviates the immediate emotional responses that can lead to suspending a student.

These discussions sometimes elicit defensive responses like, “Jamal clearly broke one of the code of conduct rules. Are you saying we shouldn’t suspend students for this behavior?” Maintaining

a focus on the data has helped us to return the conversation to the disproportionate numbers of Black and or Latino males who fell into almost every discipline category, and to dig deeper into the reasons.

“Disruption of the educational process” was one common discipline code infraction for males of color. An analysis of discipline write-ups revealed that many teachers interacting with male students of color perceived them to be louder and more aggressive than White students. As the teacher escalated, the student would match with equal intensity. Focusing on assumptions or beliefs of the teachers allowed us to consider training teachers to respond with greater understanding of a student’s experiences at home, in some instances, or a more trauma-informed response, to help de-escalate the situation.

We started to think more deeply about moving away from initial responses based on deficit thinking that relied on punitive responses to misbehavior and that limited or failed to protect students (for example, policies like zero tolerance and inflexible codes of conduct). We started to ask what systemic changes were needed to more carefully and equitably respond to situations and how we could ensure that they were practiced uniformly and consistently across the district – for instance, through clear expectations and professional development. It is easy to become entrenched in the daily work and respond reflexively, “That’s the way it’s always been done.” Our detailed analysis of data in this example allowed educators to bring meaning and self-reflection to the differential outcomes we reviewed.

One of the most critical lessons learned with this process was that it gave administrators permission to look at data with a critical eye and expose areas of concern, rather than hide or justify the data. They clearly understood that this was a collaborative effort that was focused on problem solving rather than just problem finding, which helped create an environment of inquiry and trust among administrators, teachers, and youth. It also helped change mindsets about students from a deficit and punishment perspective to a more caring and culturally responsive approach.

### A CRITICAL MOMENT FOR OUR YOUTH

We are at a critical moment regarding race and race relations in our country, and educators are uniquely positioned to facilitate these dialogues in ways that can have a meaningful and long-term impact on youth trajectories. You can no longer wait for someone else to do this work. So we respectfully ask readers of this article to be bold and strong enough to leave your emotional, psychological, physical, and even intellectual comfort zones and incorporate the examination of data to effect change for underrepresented students.

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## Learning Systematically from Experience through a Research-to-Practice Pipeline in Chicago

WENDY FINE, JIFFY LANSING, AND MARSHAUN BACON

*A quantitative evaluation of a school-based group counseling and mentoring program for young men of color showed positive results, but did not explain why the program worked; qualitative research revealed mechanisms leading to the program's success.*

**T**he Becoming A Man (BAM) program is a school-based group counseling and mentoring program run by Youth Guidance (YG), a community organization that serves children in Chicago schools who are at risk. BAM guides young men to learn, internalize, and practice social cognitive skills, make responsible

decisions for their future, and become positive members of their school and community. This article weaves together the perspectives of three different stakeholders involved in research on BAM to offer a narrative about how the research partnership evolved and how the research findings are being integrated into practice.

*Wendy Fine is the director of BAM research and evaluation at Youth Guidance. Jiffy Lansing is a senior researcher at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Marshaun Bacon is a BAM senior curriculum specialist at Youth Guidance.*



## WHY IS RESEARCH IMPORTANT TO BAM?

WENDY FINE: Youth Guidance embraces evaluation, since it helps us gain deeper insight into our programs and improve them. We evaluate our processes and outcomes internally, and also partner with external evaluators who use highly rigorous approaches.

The BAM Logic Model and Theory of Change<sup>1</sup> guides the evaluation. This framework reflects our assumptions about how BAM works, expectations about its impact, and values that ground it. It defines a group of *inputs* such as high-quality, well-trained counselors; *participant characteristics*, such as students at risk for trauma; and *activities*, such as group work. The model includes both *immediate outcomes* such as improved social competencies; *intermediate outcomes* such as reduced involvement in the criminal justice system; *long-term impacts* such as successful post-secondary education or employment. The BAM curriculum teaches six core values: integrity, self-determination, positive anger expression, accountability, respect for womanhood, and visionary goal-setting. As evaluation reveals what works and how, we incorporate this learning into practice in many ways.

MARSHAUN BACON: BAM evaluation has taught us the importance of implementation fidelity to the BAM model. As BAM grows in scale, we need to ensure that it's done in the same way that generated the positive outcomes seen during evaluation. YG created the BAM Training Academy to provide training and ongoing coaching for the BAM counselors, along with curriculum development and refinement. The curriculum training and coaching also provide a good opportunity to

translate our ongoing research and evaluation findings into clinical best practices.

JIFFY LANSING: YG's approach to evaluation aligns with Chapin Hall's mission to help partners conduct rigorous, relevant, and actionable applied social policy research. My role as a qualitative researcher is to help institutions and programs adjust their practices to increase the positive impact on the young people they serve.

## WHAT THE QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH SHOWED

WENDY FINE: YG had some preliminary *internal* evidence of BAM's positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for young men of color who were at risk of becoming victims of gun violence. We saw a growing need in Chicago (and beyond) to address gun violence in the communities that we serve, so it was important that we determine how effective the program really was.

BAM first became involved in *external* research partnerships in 2009, when the University of Chicago Crime Lab (now Urban Labs), through a design competition, selected YG as a promising program to reduce youth gun violence in Chicago. The Urban Labs conducted randomized control trials (RCTs) in 2009-2010 and 2013-2015 to determine the impact of BAM on outcomes such as crime involvement and academic engagement.<sup>2</sup> The quantitative methods used were well suited to this purpose and showed promising results: up to 50 percent decrease in violent crime arrests and up to 30 percent decrease in arrests for other crime, along with a significant increase in academic engagement,

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1 See <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

2 See Heller et al. 2017.

based on an index of school attendance, persistence, and grades.

For the City of Chicago, as elsewhere in the nation, reducing crime involvement and closing the achievement gap with young men of color has become a top priority. The promising results of these BAM studies did not go unrecognized by policymakers and other stakeholders. The cost-effectiveness analysis showed that BAM also makes good economic sense, with a 30:1 return on the dollar. Finally, some results also pointed to reduced automaticity, or helping participants to slow down their decision-making, as one potential mechanism through which crime might be reduced. BAM relies partly on cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) approaches that help participants “think about their thinking.” Together, the findings from these studies have important policy implications, and have led to demand for scaling BAM and increased funding of BAM.

### WHY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

JIFFY LANSING: The quantitative research methods of BAM’s RCTs did what they were designed to do – statistically demonstrate the program’s impact on specific outcomes. But quantitative methods are not well suited to understanding the underlying mechanisms through which BAM works. Qualitative research, on the other hand, brings to light the voices of young people, contextualizes quantitative research, and opens the “black box” of mechanisms untouchable by many other forms of research. Shedding light on processes can suggest ways to improve program design, staff recruitment and training, internal oversight, and the important task of communicating how a program is working.

WENDY FINE: When we understand the underlying mechanisms that result in outcomes like reduced automaticity<sup>3</sup> and improved school engagement, we practitioners can focus our improvement activities. Current research by the Consortium on Chicago School Research on the developmental needs of youth (Nagaoka et al. 2015) supports our framework that relationships among participants, their BAM counselor, and each other can unlock the development of key success factors, such as identity development, and social/emotional competencies, such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, and responsible decision-making. The relationships are bolstered by a strong youth engagement approach, mixed with group work and men’s work/rites of passage.

It is only through using rigorous qualitative methods that we have been able to ask questions to examine how the BAM model was playing out in practice and being experienced by our participants and counselors:

- How do participants see themselves being affected by BAM?
- How do participants see BAM facilitating the development of agency, integrated identity, and skills to manage their emotions? How do they use the BAM core values in their lives?
- How do the participants see the role of the BAM counselor in development of these skills?
- What is the role of the BAM group in developing these skills?
- How are BAM counselors seen as different from other adults in their lives?

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<sup>3</sup> *Automaticity* is a pattern of automatic responses or habits that does not engage thinking at a deeper level.

JIFFY LANSING: I initially discussed with YG the idea of designing a qualitative study that would help illuminate the relationship between program components and developmental processes of BAM. In 2015 the qualitative study was born.

WENDY FINE: We always knew that most BAM participants experienced the program very deeply, but outside of how our BAM counselors described it, we didn't have a way to explain the students' perspective or see if it aligned with our theories. We desired a deeper understanding of BAM as we moved to scale and replicated the model in other cities so we could focus our program fidelity and quality improvement efforts on the most important areas.

MARSHAUN BACON: The BAM Training Academy (BTA) saw the qualitative study as not only an opportunity to clarify our understanding of how BAM works but also as a way to focus the training and ongoing coaching in key programmatic aspects to be identified by the study. Several of the BTA's senior staff met with both Wendy and Jiffy to come up with the research questions and approach to engaging youth that would later become the interview protocol. Interviewing participants and BAM counselors helped us be sure that we got the chance to ask the important questions around how each side actually sees BAM helping them. It also helped the counselors to have more buy-in to the qualitative study results.

JIFFY LANSING: BAM counselors were key to us accessing students for the study. The research team ended up conducting semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected sample of twenty-nine BAM participants and ten BAM Counselors. The sample represented youth and counselors from groups that varied on a number of salient dimensions, including counselor

longevity with BAM and counselor formal credentials, BAM integration in the school and overall BAM implementation, and youth attendance and youth length of time with BAM (one or two years), so we could leverage the variation in our analyses. The BAM participants and counselors we interviewed expressed a desire to participate in the study and have their voices heard.

## WHAT DID THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FIND?

### Key Program Components Supporting Youth Development

JIFFY LANSING: Comparative qualitative analyses of these interviews found *four key BAM program components* that support youth developmental processes.

- **The safe and special space of the BAM room** within the school building. As one youth explained,

Whatever we say in the group, stays in the group. . . . Sometimes I don't trust people [outside of the BAM group]. I don't want people making fun of me for something I say.

Other youth talked about being able to go to the BAM room outside of BAM group periods to get away from potentially dangerous situations elsewhere in the school.
- **BAM's curriculum of core values**, along with activities and group missions that help youth grapple with defining and applying these core values. Youth describe the core values as anchors for decision-making, values they could draw upon when faced with decisions. One youth explained the core value of *accountability*:

Any decision you make, you should stand behind it. You always want to make sure you make a good decision. That way you're not scared to stand behind it because it was the best decision.

Youth described many activities that resonated with them and helped them learn and practice the curriculum's core values.

- **Consistent group check-ins** as a way for young people and the BAM counselor to practice articulating their own experiences and feelings, as well as witness and support others. Check-ins were youth's favorite part of the BAM group process. Participants also reported that check-ins became more deep and meaningful over time as youth in the group opened up more and more. One youth said,

I like how we can just sit down and just talk to each other, and it's calming. . . . You're in there, everybody's relaxed . . . and it's nice to just be sitting there talking about whatever.

- **Strong relationships with the BAM counselor and others in the group**, which were built on trust over time and led to a sense of belonging, connection, and mutual responsibility. One youth recounted a story about his mother planning to move to Florida because she couldn't find work, and how he reached out to his counselor for help finding a job so his family could stay in Chicago.

The biggest thing was being in this program, because it does help me. It helps me here and it helps me in the outside world. So the first person I called was my counselor. I told him, "Hey, can you help me out? I'm kind of struggling right now. I'm trying to get a job."

One youth remarked that he would not have been friends with the people he is friends with now if he didn't come to know them through BAM.

### Developmental Mechanisms Fostering a Sense of Belonging

The core components provided the structure necessary for these developmental processes to emerge, which moved young people toward a strong sense of belonging that shapes how they think about who they are, how they experience the world, how they present themselves to others, and who they will become. As one participant who told us, "It's like I'm doing it for everybody, not just for me." We identified *three main developmental mechanisms* by which this sense of belonging with BAM was fostered.

- **Social norms (habits and behaviors).** Young people strove to live up to the behavioral habits and social norms of BAM's safe space to maintain their own reputation within the group and to maintain that space for the whole group.
- **Agency (decision-making and cognition).** Core values and activities of BAM served as anchor points for immediate and longer-term decision-making. Coupled with the safe space and relationships with their counselor and BAM peers, this sense of agency provided participants with confidence in their ability to control their own future and develop a longer-term future-orientation.
- **Empathy (emotion and language).** Check-ins provided a structure for BAM youth to share their thoughts and emotions with each other. The personal storytelling and listening to other's personal stories developed skills in identifying underlying emotions and developing empathy.

## WHAT TO DO WITH THE RESEARCH FINDINGS?

WENDY FINE: While the results of Chapin Hall’s qualitative study indicate that our previous BAM theory of change is largely supported, they also hold a wealth of information that is helping YG focus on refining the theory of change and logic model. The results also allow us to identify key practices around which we can strengthen our fidelity of implementation to ensure positive youth development outcomes, which, in turn, will lead to better life and academic outcomes.

- **Authentic relationships with BAM counselors** play a critical role in participants’ development of their sense of self. BAM is implementing coaching systems, supports, and training for BAM counselors to ensure they are creating authentic relationships through youth engagement, modeling of desired behaviors, critical listening, and appropriate challenging and confronting.
- **Creating a safe space** is essential for the participants to be vulnerable, explore their emotions, be challenged, and develop trust. We are currently partnering with each school to ensure that the school will support the creation of a safe, confidential space for the BAM work to occur.
- **A new framework to measure progress in social-emotional development** emerged from the findings on the key BAM mechanisms that create positive change. BAM is piloting the use of the PEAR Institute’s Holistic Student Assessment<sup>4</sup> in an effort to better determine immediate outcomes of BAM. We may also develop other scales that more directly measure these key mechanisms now that they are more clearly defined.

MARSHAUN BACON: The qualitative study confirmed much of what we already thought about BAM, but it also illuminated the components and mechanisms and put them into a developmental framework. BAM is not a “one size fits all” program that builds a single developmental process or skill. Rather, it supports the complexities of youth development and accommodates the differences between individual youth.

One of the key takeaways for us is that the success of the intervention depends on how the BAM counselor employs the four core program components identified in the study. The BAM counselor must develop the skills to be able to create the safe space, connect the curriculum activities and missions to the core values, ensure that the check-ins are deep and meaningful, and create and maintain consistent authentic relationships with students. Techniques used to support the development of these skills include effective use of self (using their own stories while respecting boundaries), cognitive behavioral therapy, and men’s work/rites of passage.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

JIFFY LANSING: Qualitative research, by systematically exploring participants’ and counselors’ experiences of BAM, brought important learnings about program components and the developmental mechanisms being influenced by BAM.

MARSHAUN BACON: These learnings helped to modify our theory of change and were both relevant and actionable to the implementation of BAM. We have more language to discuss how BAM works, and are now more focused than ever on providing .....

4 See <https://www.thepearinstitute.org/holistic-student-assessment>.

supports that develop BAM counselors to be effective in these aspects of the program.

WENDY FINE: Having results from both the quantitative and the qualitative studies is allowing BAM to define a course of high-quality implementation that supports program replication and scaling to more young men for whom it's not too late to have life changing positive impact.

The full qualitative study can be found at: <https://www.chapinhall.org/news/articles/qualitative-study-becoming-man-bam-program>

For further resources, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

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## Changing Deficit Narratives about Young Latino Men in Texas through a Research-Based Mentorship Program

EMMET E. CAMPOS, REBEKAH VAN RYN, AND TY J. DAVIDSON

*Strong institutional partnerships led to the development of a research agenda and mentoring program for young Latino men that has yielded local results in Austin (TX) and scaled up to state and national networks.*

I (Emmet Campos) became director of Project MALES<sup>1</sup> and the Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color in 2015, on the cusp of a transformative period for the project. Taking the helm at the end of our first phase of this Texas-based

initiative to serve male students of color, I had to hit the ground running. As we move into Consortium 2.0, the roller coaster ride shows no sign of easing.

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1. See <http://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/>.

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**PROJECT MALES:  
ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL  
CAUSES OF THE LATINO MALE  
ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

When Project MALES began in 2008, little had been written about Latino male students and the growing achievement gap between Latino males and their peers. Although college access had increased nationally for Latina students at least since the 1980s and 1990s, males were falling precariously behind in high school graduation, persistence, and college graduation, and the gap was growing. Six out of ten college degrees that are earned by all Latinx students are earned by Latinas.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the moral imperative to address this issue, this trend, if not immediately addressed, will lead to dire consequences for U.S. workforce, given the expanding diversity of U.S. demographics.

In response to the growing racial and gender achievement gap for young men of color, and with special concern for Latino males, the University of Texas developed a research agenda that began with a Trellis Foundation (formerly TG) commissioned paper by Project MALES founders Victor Sáenz and Luis Ponjuán (2008) on Latino males in higher education that explored the multiple factors to address this troubling trend in higher education. They challenged the deficit-based thinking that dominated discussion of this issue, focusing attention on larger socio-cultural, structural factors that perpetuated the gap in Latino male college enrollment and degree attainment. One of the significant results of this paper was the birth of an idea that would positively impact the futures of young men of

color throughout the state of Texas at multiple scales. Joining the project when I did almost three years ago has positioned me to help the Project MALES/Consortium team to build on this foundation.

**LOCAL IMPACT: THE  
MENTORING PROGRAM AT  
TRAVIS EARLY COLLEGE HIGH  
SCHOOL**

Five years ago, Sáenz approached William B. Travis Early College High School with an idea around mentoring young men of color in hopes of improving the matriculation and sustainability of this group in college by addressing the social, economic, and cultural obstacles impacting these young men. Austin Independent School District (AISD) and the University of Texas’s Project MALES began a partnership to design such a mentoring system.

Project MALES has become the cornerstone of our peer-mentoring program at Travis. Students in Project MALES receive guidance on topics consistent with other programs, such as attendance, grades, and social emotional development. But it is the shared sense of brotherhood, explicit focus on college and career readiness, and intentional development of these young men into leaders that establishes this program as unique in its effectiveness with our young men of color.

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2 See U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2013 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.



## Feeling Successful – and Being Successful

Every week, Project MALES mentors arrive at campus to mentor our students. Hours are spent breaking down barriers and discussing issues. We have built time periods called “Advocacy” into the school day for these discussions. Most of these young men come from low-income neighborhoods and Spanish-language dominant families. Critical mentoring approaches and social-emotional-based curricula are used to overcome the academic and emotional obstacles they face. Many students come from homes where poverty, mobility, increasing rental rates, taking in additional family members, and loss of jobs are recurring themes. Knowing this, the UT Austin undergraduate mentors who serve as role models are building leadership skills and resilience within our mentees. Students walk out of mentoring sessions with strategies on how to cope with change, be proactive at home, advocate for their learning, and find resources in the community.

Project MALES has also provided Travis Early College High School with a model to expand its mentoring program to include internal and peer mentoring. Middle and high school mentees are mentored by UT undergrads, who, in turn, are mentored by UT graduate students, who are mentored by staff and professors. This model has been recognized by former President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper Initiative, the STRIVE Network, *PBS NewsHour*, the *Atlantic*, and SXSWedu.

The partnership with Project MALES has led to positive outcomes for our students. Through telling their stories, these young men become advocates for themselves and emerge as leaders. They want to tell their stories, from our student who for the first time discussed

his sexuality and the effects of hiding his orientation, to another student who sat at the White House, next to basketball star Kevin Durant, and explained how his mentor helped save him from destroying his own life. Our young men feel they are successful – and they are. Perhaps most importantly, one of the biggest drivers of that success is accountability to their mentors and each other.

Positive outcomes show up in our data: increased average attendance for mentees from school year 2015-2016 to 2016-2017 was 5 percentage points. All senior students who returned to school and were part of the first mentee cohort applied to a post-secondary institution. We will monitor whether or not these students enroll in college at the end of the year. As mentoring programs have expanded over the past seven years, Travis Early College High School has increased its total student graduation rate by 40 percentage points for four-year cohort graduation.

## Supporting Young Men to Meet Daunting Challenges

The trajectory of one young man in the Travis Early College High School mentoring program, Geraldo,<sup>3</sup> illustrates the need the program addresses and the program’s impact. Geraldo entered high school having already dealt with difficulties with English, feelings of apathy toward school, a need to support his family, and the deportation of family members. As a freshman, he was working sixty hours a week, traveling back and forth to his home country to visit family members and provide money, and trying to keep a roof over his head and food in his stomach. He fell behind in class and into a spiral of absences.

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3 Pseudonym has been used.

After six weeks of sporadic attendance, he was approached about receiving a mentor.

In an introductory meeting, Geraldo was quiet and reserved, but opened up over the following year once he had someone to whom he could turn for help. His mentor used Advocacy not only to build a relationship, but also to discuss the real reasons why Gerardo was absent from school. Once those reasons became clear, the school provided support. Even with the fear of ICE deportations, his mother's decision to go back to her home country, and a full-time job, Geraldo is passing every class, is on track to graduate, and has maintained a 97 percent attendance rate for over fourteen months. His story is not unique – there are hundreds of Geraldos at Travis Early College High School. We just need to find the time to mentor them and provide the support they need.

### An Impact That Reaches Beyond One School

Project MALES is a crucial component to the educational success of Travis ECHS male students. Yet the impact of this program goes beyond Travis ECHS to provide systemic support for young men of color at multiple levels of the educational journey. The undergraduate college male students who partner with our high school and middle school students are enrolled in a college credit service-learning course that counts toward their degree program. In this IMPACT class, UT undergraduates are introduced to the literature on males of color in K–12 and higher education and to cutting-edge mentoring approaches geared to this population. Along with fall and spring semester mentor retreats, *pláticas*,<sup>4</sup> and other forms of training, this class creates an ongoing system to support the mentoring program.

Looking at the long-term impacts of educational support for men of color, we cannot fail to acknowledge the need of our college students to receive support themselves. UT undergrads and graduate students participating in Project MALES also receive mentoring to ensure they succeed academically. This intentional multi-generational approach to mentorship ensures that the program is sustainable, systematic, and successful. Former high school mentees are now moving up the chain to serve as mentors themselves.

### STATE IMPACT: SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The partnership between UT Austin and AISD to address systemic barriers to college for young men of color began with developing a research agenda focused on Latino males, then with an intentional mentoring program at one high school campus and now at multiple campuses and school districts. More recently, the work has expanded to address statewide concerns through a regional and state-wide network.

Just before the 2016 Texas Male Student Leadership Summit,<sup>5</sup> The Advisory Council for the Consortium<sup>6</sup> met to discuss how to sustain and institutionalize their work to create systems that promote success for our male students of color. The Project

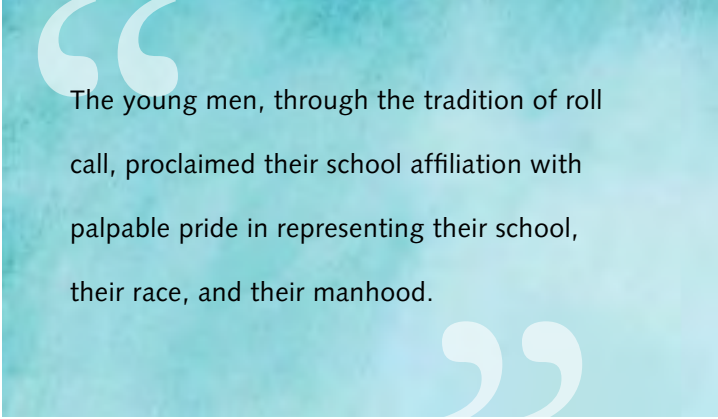
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- 4 *Pláticas* are a Project MALES monthly speaker series for our UT undergraduate and graduate mentors. We invite members of the local East Austin or university communities to discuss topical issues and to share their personal experiences as mentors and/or mentees.
- 5 See <http://diversity.utexas.edu/txedconsortium/ut-male-student-leadership-summit/>.
- 6 See <http://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/texas-education-consortium-for-male-students-of-color/> and <http://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/about/>.

MALES research team is also developing tools and activities to be shared online to build institutional capacity, based on findings from two years of site visits at its seventeen charter institutions (the original founding members of the Consortium). We concluded the Council meeting with a shared sense of purpose and an intentional plan in hand to support replication of these practices. Empowered to influence this issue through a regional and state-wide network, we moved on to the opening ceremonies of the Summit.

As our Master of Ceremonies called out the name of each participating institution, the young men stood and, through the tradition of roll call, proclaimed their school affiliation with palpable pride in representing their school, their race, and their manhood. They went on to attend breakout sessions on brotherhood, leadership, college-career readiness, and health and wellness; heard inspirational messages from fellow successful men of color; and broadened their network to continue the systemic change at their home campuses. One young man embraced the concept of Restorative Circles and reflected on how he could bring those practices back to his college. Other students connected with mentors on financial management, filmmakers telling the story of immigrants, and other positive male role models.

The annual Student Leadership Summit continues to empower, inspire, and support young men of color and the adults who are committed to their success. In August 2017, a week after the horrific displays of racism in Charlottesville, Virginia, we united around the theme of “Brotherhood” – not only for young men of color, but for humanity fighting for a common cause. Each participant, in the shared endeavor of creating systems of empowerment to ensure equity for men



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of color, walked away with at least one thing they can personally do differently to continue this work in their own sphere of influence.

In addition to the annual Student Leadership Summit in Austin, the Consortium partners also attend Consortium Institutes around the state twice a year, in which administrators, faculty, and staff network, listen to expert presenters, and receive professional training. Starting in 2017, regional Male Student Leadership Summits led by local Consortium partners have convened around the state. Consortium members can also access new capacity building tools and activities developed in partnership with research institutions.

In one example of this partnership, the research team at Texas A&M University shared research findings with Austin Independent School District (AISD) from its AISD site visit related to four interdependent components, identified by research teams at UT and Texas A&M, of a broader system impacting the high school academic experience – transitioning to college, academic experiences, school engagement, and degree completion. Failure to provide intervention in any one directly results in a negative impact in at least one of the others.

A total of sixteen institutional site reports have been prepared by the Project MALES research team based on site visits with founding charter member schools, and a summary report that captures findings across all schools will be published in fall 2018. This research will be developed into tools and services that will be shared with other Consortium members. This, again, is the power of the Consortium: institutions representing three educational sectors – school districts, community colleges, and universities – sharing responsibility for the systemic change to better support our young men of color.

### **RAISING AWARENESS ACROSS THE NATION: THE FRUITS OF A DECADE OF WORK**

Almost a decade following the initial call in Sáenz and Ponjuán’s paper, we are beginning to see the fruits of that initial provocation on Latino male research. In fact, that research agenda has now grown nationally under the auspices of Project MALES, an ambitious research-based action project housed in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. While the research agenda is focused specifically on Latino males in K–12 and higher education, the Division’s two other initiatives serve males in both of the two larger demographics in Texas: Latinx and African American communities. These three initiatives are integrally linked, informing the work of each. They are aligned with principles of critical narrative change, (moving beyond hopeless, criminalized, and deficit misrepresentations of boys and men of color) and gender-specific

focus, as well as the implementation of culturally relevant and inclusive practices.

The research agenda has now evolved into the Project MALES Research Institute. The Institute is made up of two research teams at UT Austin and Texas A&M University, led by Victor Sáenz and Luis Ponjuán, respectively, and the Project MALES Faculty and Research Affiliates program, a network of thirty-four researchers (and growing) across the country. The Institute focuses on understanding the experiences of Latino and African American male students across the education pipeline. Through research publications, policy and research reports, and presentations at national and regional conferences and meetings, Project MALES now brings awareness and attention nationally to the experiences and successes of male students of color and especially Latino males.

The Institute is able to raise the visibility of research on male students of color and seeks to become the premiere Latino male-focused research center in the country. The Research Institute continues to grow and further institutionalized its work in January 2018, when, for the first time, it convened all thirty-plus scholars from the Affiliates program and the UT Austin and Texas A&M research teams at its inaugural 2018 Symposium for Faculty and Research Affiliates at UT Austin.<sup>7</sup> This exciting new development was made possible by the generous support of RISE BMOC, a national initiative led by Shaun Harper at the University of Southern California, and the Greater Texas Foundation.

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/?s=symposium+for+faculty+and+research+affiliates>.

The importance cannot be overstated of collaboration and networking between major initiatives like President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative, the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color (COSEBOC), and MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, among others, that are national in scope and focused on addressing the needs of males of color in K–12 and higher education. By fostering collaboration across various educational sectors, mentoring programs, and local, state and national initiatives focused on boys and men of color, practice-based research programs like Project MALES are providing some of the answers needed to sustain structural and systemic change for the futures of young men of color.

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## REFERENCE

- Sáenz, V., and L. Ponjuán. 2008. “The Vanishing Latino Male in Higher Education,” *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education Online* (December 11), <http://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Journal-of-Hispanic-Higher-Education-2008-Saenz.pdf>.



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