

# POLICY NOTES

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## *In this Issue*

The achievement gaps that exist today are an affront to a society committed to equal educational opportunity and are a drag on the nation's economy, prosperity and competitiveness. The large gap between Black males and others exists before these children start school and continues throughout their lifespan. This gap and the particular plight of Black males was the focus of two recent ETS conferences that are highlighted in this issue of *ETS Policy Notes*.

The more recent conference, "**A Strong Start: Positioning Young Black Boys for Educational Success**," convened in partnership with the Children's Defense Fund, took place at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on June 14, 2011, and attracted more than 350 educators, researchers, practitioners and policymakers. The conference focused attention on the nation's 3.5 million Black males from birth to age nine.

*(continued on page 15)*



“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”

— Frederick Douglass

## Addressing Achievement Gaps

### Positioning Young Black Boys for Educational Success

America is failing its young Black boys. In metropolitan ghettos, rural villages and midsized townships across the country, schools have become holding tanks for populations of Black boys who have a statistically higher probability of walking the corridors of prison than the halls of college. Across America, the problem of Black male achievement seems intractable. We fail our Black sons more than any other racial or ethnic group.

The statistics are bleak.<sup>1</sup> Nationally, graduation rates for Black teens teeter just under 50 percent. And in many large, urban school districts, more than half of Black males drop out of school.

Average Black male achievement falls far below that of White and Asian boys. Only 12 percent of Black fourth-grade boys are proficient in reading, compared to 38 percent of White boys. Only 12 percent of Black eighth-grade boys are proficient in math, compared to 44 percent of White boys. By fourth grade, Black students may be three full years behind their peers.<sup>2</sup> “As we allow this underclass to grow, our society and our democracy is at risk. That is not meant as an overstatement,” said ETS President and CEO **Kurt Landgraf**. “It really must be the most challenging problem in American public education.”

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*“Children are suffering from a toxic cocktail of poverty, illiteracy, racial discrimination and massive incarceration that sentences poor boys to dead-end and hopeless lives.”*

— *Marian Wright Edelman*

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The reasons for this are pervasive. “Children are suffering from a toxic cocktail of poverty, illiteracy, racial discrimination and massive incarceration that sentences poor boys to dead-end and hopeless lives,” asserted **Marian Wright Edelman**, president and founder of the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF). “It is a community disaster. A national disaster. Black boys are always at the bottom of the totem pole. We are here to change that.”

“Our goal today is to examine the challenges facing young Black boys in America,” said **Michael Nettles**, Senior Vice President of the Policy Evaluation and Research Center at ETS. “We want to consider ways to position this very vulnerable population for educational success as early as possible in their educational careers.”

The story for American Black boys can have a different ending if society focuses its efforts on their education and

development, CDF’s Edelman advised. Working together, we can explore the challenges facing this population and the opportunities to position young Black boys to realize their potential. “What is going on with our children is not an act of God, but of adult choice,” lamented Edelman. “We can learn from what we know how to do.”

Edelman addressed the conference “A Strong Start: Positioning Young Black Boys for Educational Success” in Washington, D.C., at the National Press Club, on June 14, 2011. The conference, co-sponsored by ETS and CDF, attracted more than 350 educators, researchers and policymakers to confront the crisis faced by 3.5 million Black boys from birth to age nine, and to identify and highlight programs that are making a difference.

This is the second in a series of conferences that ETS has organized to look specifically at the Black male achievement gap. The first, “Climbing the Academic Achievement Ladder: Promoting the Success of Black Males,” also covered in this issue of *ETS Policy Notes*, took place at ETS headquarters in Princeton, N.J., on November 13, 2010. ETS co-sponsored the event with the New Jersey Department of Education and with support from the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at NYU’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, and the Center for Effective School Practices at Rutgers University.

This issue of *ETS Policy Notes* will weave together highlights from both conferences, examining the status of Black males in America as well as the important roles that families, schools, communities and public policy can play in improving this status. All contribute to the perfect storm of educational and economic negligence that society now must seek to counter. The focus begins with the earliest achievement gap noted at 9 months of age, and continues with innovative programs that may alter the achievement trajectory for these children. Finally, we will describe an important initiative on which CDF and ETS are collaborating that expands successful practice with ETS’s support of a CDF Freedom School® in Newark, N.J.

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<sup>1</sup> In preparation for the June conference, data describing the rugged terrain that many Black males face during the course of their lives, from birth through death, are presented in *A Strong Start: Positioning Young Black Boys for Educational Success: A Statistical Profile*. This publication is available at [http://www.ets.org/s/sponsored\\_events/pdf/16818\\_BlackMale\\_trifold3\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.ets.org/s/sponsored_events/pdf/16818_BlackMale_trifold3_WEB.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Lewis et al., *A Call for Change: The Social and Educational Factors Contributing to the Outcomes of Black Males in Urban Schools*, Council of the Great City Schools, October 2010.

## Education and the Family

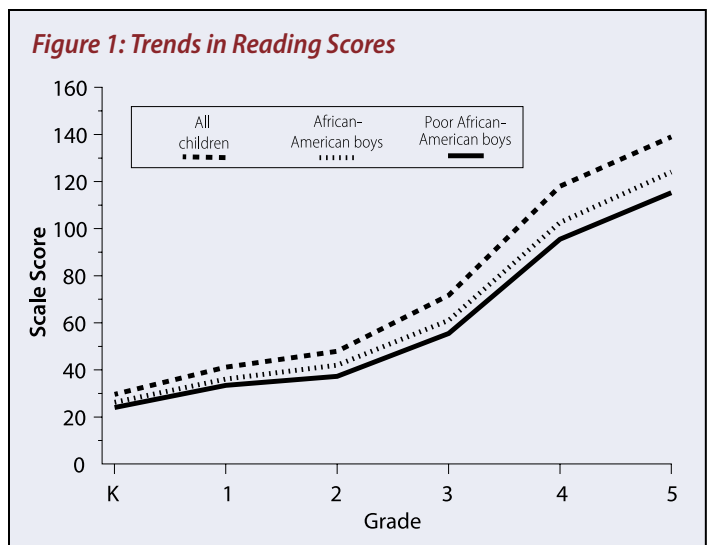
"Families are critical," said **Oscar Barbarin III**, the Hertz Endowed Chair in the Department of Psychology at Tulane University. Families establish a home environment and provide nurturing for children. Parents create connectivity, Barbarin said, by exposing children to varied experiences, expanding their knowledge and providing the interpretive framework for their ongoing learning.

"We recognize parents are the first teachers," noted Professor **Vivian Gadsden**, the William T. Carter Professor of Child Development and Education at the University of Pennsylvania, supporting Barbarin's sentiments. "The most important factor in a child's upbringing is whether the child is brought up in a loving, healthy, supportive environment."

In the first five years of life, brain development occurs faster than at any other time. During these years, the brain is the most pliable, and vulnerable to influences. The relationships that babies build with others and the world around them profoundly influence their development and life trajectory.

Complex skills build on these early, basic ones. "An ever-growing body of research tells us that executive functioning skills, or soft skills, like self regulation, persistence, motivation, confidence are just as important for school readiness as emerging cognitive skills," said **Rashanda Perryman**, Senior Policy Associate with CDF. Soft skills are also predictive of academic success. If children have developed nurturing relationships, dynamic language interactions, and have positive role models, they will be set for school.

Yet not all students are ready. We know that the achievement gap already exists when children start school. But why? "When do disparities begin? Why does the gap emerge at all?" asked **Iheoma Iruka**, a researcher at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. According to her analysis of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, a cognitive gap exists at 9 months of age, and widens by 24 months. Thus, well before formal schooling begins, the Black child is behind, and by fifth grade, that child lags by nearly two full years. Astonishingly, a gap exists for Black boys of all income levels — regardless of poverty. The trend in reading scores for all children compared with African-American boys is shown in Figure 1.



Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (ECLS-K)

Of course, poverty exacerbates the problem. Children in single-mother households constitute the poorest demographic group in America. Yet the percentage of Black babies born out of wedlock has continued to rise, said Gadsden. From the late 1800s to the 1960s, close to 70 percent of Black children were born to married couples. According to the most recent data, 71 percent of Black children are born out of wedlock.

**Aisha Ray**, Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty at the Erikson Institute, reports that research shows powerful effects of poverty from birth to age 8, particularly in a few critical areas, like maternal depression. When moms need to work more than one job to meet financial obligations, not only are they often depressed, but time for children is squeezed. Reading to a child and being warm and responsive to his or her needs all compete for time. Yet, this is an issue not only of maternal bonding, but of academic preparation. Children whose mothers are responsive are more likely to actively engage in their environment, have longer attention spans, relate better to others, persevere when frustrated, have higher tolerance for frustration and be less anxious themselves, said Dr. Ray. These are all factors for school success. Poor, young mothers in particular need help. They find it in Mississippi.

The Mississippi Delta is "a snapshot of rural America," cautioned the **Reverend Anjohnette Gibbs**, Project Director for the Delta Early Learning Program (DELDP),

an evidence-based home-visiting program that supports young mothers and teaches them how to care for their babies. Programs like this are urgently needed — more than 50 percent of single moms in the region are poor. DELP provides in-home support for new mothers during the first days and weeks after childbirth, connects new moms to resources and teaches them important skills like reading to their babies. Indeed, DELP is designed to strengthen the baby’s cognitive development in ways that will better prepare them for school. Seventy-five percent of the infants in the programs show that they function at or above level. Such work is important to Reverend Gibbs: “In 100 years, it won’t matter if you drove a Cadillac or a Chevy. It will matter what we do for children. We consider a strong start positioning young Black boys for educational success.”

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Fathers matter, too. Gadsden’s National Center on Fathers and Families conducts research on how a father’s presence can contribute to the economic and social well-being of a child. The presence of the father has documented positive effects, maintained Gadsden. “Committed and responsible fathering during a child’s infancy contributes to emotional security, curiosity, and math and verbal skills.” Too often poverty and underemployment thwart the best intentions. Often, young Black fathers view their role as a traditional protector and breadwinner. They describe a fatherhood that reflects media influence, not personal experience, Gadsden added.

Television may be one culprit. Compared with other groups, African-American boys, on average, watch more television — supplemented by video games. The consequences are confusion of what a man is supposed to be, said Barbarin. In unsupervised situations at home, they get premature independence. Often, they must assume the role of man of the house and accept autonomy without possessing the good judgment to use it. When they become fathers, lacking the necessary

background and skills, they may disengage, move away and abdicate responsibility. Then, the cycle repeats itself. Children raised in fatherless families are more likely to have lower test scores and to drop out of school.

The Open Society Foundation’s **Shawn Dove**, Executive Director of the Campaign for Black Male Achievement, beat the odds. Raised by a “strong Jamaican single mother,” Dove admits he was the kind of youth one might hope to reform. He was lucky. In junior high, when he adopted the herd mentality and wanted to follow friends on a non-academic path, his mother intervened. She refused permission for him to enroll in what Dove calls “Major Gym.” Resentment high, Dove enrolled in science prep.

Dove uses the story to ask: “How do we engage and empower parents?” How do we increase the odds for these children? According to Dove, we have many gaps to deal with besides the achievement gap. How do we defy the issue of zip code? When we get communities together to empower parents we will have a head start.

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Gadsden’s Center has found that just about any constructive activity contributes positively to child development — especially reading to children, which is the pathway to literacy. Taking walks together, counting objects, and doing simple tasks at homes also contribute. Simply hugging children, giving them attention, and telling them they can be successful can cause them to rise to the occasion, Gadsden emphasized.

As CDF’s Edelman reminded us: “Children live up or down to our expectations.”

## Community and Poverty

In too many American communities today, the circumstances caused by poverty and disadvantage subsume the lives of young Black boys.

Consider these statistics:<sup>3</sup>

- 36 percent of Black children live in poverty
- 35 percent of Black children live in households described as “food insecure”
- 38 percent of Black children live in households where parents lack stable employment
- 13 percent of Black children have a mother with less than a high school education
- More than 75 percent of Black children born between 1985 and 2000 grew up in “high disadvantage” neighborhoods.

“The fact that we are in the United States and parents are reporting insecurity about food is an issue of concern,” noted UNC’s Iruka. Children, particularly Black boys, who are born into poverty have less access to health care, go to lower-quality early childcare, attend inferior neighborhood schools, and will probably live in poverty, observes CDF’s Perryman. Perhaps most distressing, according to Edelman, is that “a Black boy born in 2001 has a one-in-three chance of going to prison in his lifetime.”

In many areas, Black Americans are segregated in minority communities where children are more likely to go to school with other children of color. The impact of racial, social and class stratification over a lifetime can have devastating effects for Black boys, notes Ray. Racial segregation and the ideologies that support it help to spawn high levels of violence, poor mental and physical health, substance abuse, unemployment and underemployment. Segregation can affect middle class Black boys, as well.

When change does come, said **Russlynn Ali**, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education, it must come from communities and community members, who together “will make the schools the hub of their community and the place to go where you can have a safe start and a healthy start and a fair start and a moral start.”

Bremerton School District can boast one such community-sponsored program. Bremerton, Washington, is a small community with less than 5,000 students — really a pocket of poverty in an affluent district. Their community model was enacted with no additional funds. As Special Programs Director for Bremerton, **Linda Sullivan-Dudzic**, announced, “If it can be done in Bremerton, it can be done anywhere.”

The original motivation to start a community-sponsored program came when involved people realized that only 4 percent of students entered kindergarten knowing alphabet letters. The group could have created a small, private pre-school to serve their own 30 students and serve their self-interest. Instead, they brought community partners together, examined the research, acted collectively, and now serve 800 students.

After reviewing neuroscience research, the community and the school district tried to answer two essential questions: What should children know and be able to do? How do you best teach children? Their goals were to increase the number of children entering kindergarten with early reading and math skills, and to decrease learning difficulties for the students. With buy-in from the community, participating schools share a common language, common goals and resources. Teachers engage in monthly professional development meetings and remain part of an assessment loop.

“Parents alone can’t do everything,” admonished CDF’s Edelman. “We have to get kids into strong early childhood experiences in the first three years of life.” Only then can we assume children will be on the path to literacy. “If you can’t read and compute and think in this culture, you are sentenced to social and economic death.”

Many communities share Bremerton’s problems — few share the accomplishments. Washington, D.C., can boast one of the highest preschool enrollment rates in the country. But access does not spell success: Less than 30 percent of D.C.’s programs meet accepted standards of quality. **Michela English**, President and CEO of Fight for Children, an independent nonprofit that focuses on quality early childhood programs, observed, “If we

<sup>3</sup> References for these statistics and related statistics can be found in *A Strong Start: Positioning Young Black Boys for Educational Success: A Statistical Profile* [http://www.ets.org/s/sponsored\\_events/pdf/16818\\_BlackMale\\_trifold3\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.ets.org/s/sponsored_events/pdf/16818_BlackMale_trifold3_WEB.pdf)

do successful interventions early, we won't have to do expensive ones later." English sees this problem exacerbated by the fact that young parents often do not know how to choose a preschool program, other than by asking friends. Fight for Children is producing information and free videos to help teach young families what to look for in a preschool for their child.

Quality and resources must go hand in hand. Educators in Bremerton have combined resources and focused dollars "on what is needed to help the children." Consequently, the number of children in strategic and intensive classes has been significantly decreased, freeing Title 1 funds to move down into preschool or up into high school. Children in Bremerton have made great strides and now outperform children from other school districts. Within Bremerton, children advanced from only 4 percent of students being able to identify letters to 65 percent. But, Sullivan warned, "Strong pre-K is not sufficient. It is wasted if it is not supported by full-day kindergarten."

## Revamped Schools

The need for a strong educational foundation is well recognized. "The development of high-quality, seamless pre-K through grade three continuum programs" relies on research-based strategies for optimizing a child's early cognitive and emotional development, said **Jeanne Middleton-Hairston**, National Director of the CDF Freedom Schools® program. When implemented correctly, the pre-K through third grade continuum moves students smoothly from one grade to the next.

"If we can get it right before age 8 or 9, if we give children a solid foundation, they'll be on firmer footing," noted **Kristie Kauerz**, Program Director for pre-K–third grade at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The academic shift between learning to read and reading to learn happens right around grade three, and students need solid skills by then.

"We know how to fix this!" said Kauerz. "We know that high-quality preschool is important, [and that] high-quality full-day kindergarten has paid off tremendously. But full-day kindergarten is not a guarantee." She added, "We need high-quality elementary schools, so skills do not drop off."

Kauerz suggested that "there needs to be aligned quality across the curriculum." A disconnect occurs when high-quality programs are followed by programs that lack quality. "We are trying to offer superb pre-kindergarten, only to stick kids into a low-quality kindergarten program." The Chicago Child Parent Center (CPC) is one example of an effective extended intervention. Students who attended pre-K through grade three at CPC showed encouraging statistics: early achievement gains persisted in middle school, fewer children were retained, and fewer were relegated to special education. A new long-term study of the CPC program, published in the June 2011 issue of *Science*, shows program effects continue through adulthood, resulting in lower incarceration rates, higher marriage rates and higher income levels.

During these critical early years, students develop cognitive, communication and math skills, build social and emotional competence, and establish patterns of engagement and learning. "What is so magical about 'pre-K through third' is that we are focusing on horizontal alignment," said Kauerz, by raising the quality of each early grade to build a strong educational base. Meanwhile, through collaboration and support, they are creating a ladder of learning, a vertical continuum that results in a strong foundation for young children.

## After-School and Summer Community-based Programs

**Khary Lazarre-White** is co-founder and Executive Director of Brotherhood Sister Sol (BHSS), an out-of-school and summer program in the Bronx. BHSS is an "evidence-based" model, said Lazarre-White, with emphasis on morality and ethics. Eighty-five percent of their students graduate from high school, as opposed to 24 percent in similarly troubled neighborhoods. While New York City's teen pregnancy rate is slightly below 10 percent, BHSS's rate falls below 2 percent. And after 15 years in the trenches, not a single member of BHSS is part of the prison complex. "We want all of our young people to go to college, to survive, graduate," asserted Lazarre-White. "We believe in higher education, to learn what it means to be strong men and leaders of their community."

Though co-educational, they boast a single-gender focus. Starting in 1995 with one brotherhood chapter, the essence of BHSS is to guide thinking and behavior on what it means to be a man. Youngsters start the program between the ages of six and twelve, and usually stay four to six years. “They will write their own ethical and moral code and revisit that every year and rewrite it,” explained Lazzarre-White. “This is the code, this is how you’re going to live your life. If you want to be a doc, go to med school. If you want to be a lawyer, go to law school. Where do you go to learn how to be a young man? That ethos of how you live life is through every aspect of your life.”

BHSS fulfills a concept the founders prized, that of an alternate, stable home with discipline, guidance and morals — skills most middle-class kids enjoy. The program tenets at BHSS surround support and discipline, smattered with doses of guidance and love. Discipline is taught as a means of inculcating personal responsibility. In addition, staff is keen to access student opportunities, like jobs and internships.

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*“We need a Marshall Plan for education in this country.”*

*— Khary Lazzarre-White*

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Finally, BHSS takes college seriously. Guidance is comprehensive: Staff accompanies kids on college selection visits, and provide assistance to get in and stay there. Meanwhile, staff does what middle-class parents do when their kids get into trouble. “We defend them to the fullest extent of the law if they are arrested, and make sure that isn’t a permanent part of the record.”

With such a lopsided number of Black sons graduating from high school, Lazzarre-White wonders aloud why there are not programs like this in every city in America. “On the macro level, we need a Marshall Plan for education in this country,” declared Lazzarre-White, who argues for the kind of money the affluent spend on their children. “People argue for this or that school — it’s a waste of time. While we have those arguments, hundreds of children fail.”

## Progressive K–12 Schools for Black Male Academic Achievement

Too often, the reality in America is that if you are poor, Black and male, you may need to win a lottery to get a good education. Educational lotteries exist across the states. Without winning a lottery to get into a competitive elementary school, the odds of graduating high school are less than 50 percent<sup>4</sup>, and the chances of reading beyond an eighth-grade level, even if you graduate, are not much better. Yet, if you win a lottery for a superb charter or public school, your chances of graduating are closer to 80 percent — at least, at one of the schools described below. With luck, a Black youngster might just embrace the American dream. Is this the America we tout? Several examples of trendsetting, innovative programs for transformational reform are highlighted below.

**Early Intervention and Early Education.** Excellence Boys Charter School is a model for excellence. Founding Principal **Jabali Sawicki** talks passionately about imbuing his students with the message that they are college bound — in kindergarten, from day one. What steps create that academic mindset? To start, teachers refer to students as scholars, homerooms bear university names, and after-school programs emphasize leadership skills through activities that embrace the physical and literary, like athletic and Shakespeare clubs. More practically, school tutoring, Saturday programs and Summer Academy are all available. But, the real key is literacy.

Located in the Bedford-Stuyvesant community of Brooklyn, Excellence currently serves 395 boys in grades K–8. Sawicki exudes pure energy in talking about goals for success, and the laudable commitment to make school joyful. Statistics are encouraging. In 2009, in grade four, 90 percent of students passed reading exams at Advanced or Proficient levels; in grade five, 100 percent of students passed math exams at Advanced and Proficient levels — placing Excellence among the top schools in New York City.

“Schools are the critical lever to change the trajectory of young boys,” Sawicki stated . . . and he knows that for the lever to work, he needs more time. Students go to school nine hours a day, about two hours

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<sup>4</sup> *Yes We Can: The 2010 Schott 50 State Report on Black Males in Public Education* reveals that the overall 2007–2008 graduation rate for Black males in the U.S. was only 47 percent.

longer than average. That time is devoted to books. "What allows us to be successful is the emphasis on literacy." Citing the crux of America's problem with academic achievement, Sawicki said, "Something happens between third and fifth grade. At that point, school is dominated by text. If you get to that point and you can't read, you'll only become frustrated."

When students put in practice time, they reap rewards. This is standard in music and sports — and logical for reading. At Excellence, teachers allot three and a half hours a day to the reading core, including reading aloud, writing, comprehension, decoding and analysis. To bolster boys' natural inclination to be part of a group, book groups abound, from Harry Potter to a hip hop club. Black male authors from the community regularly come in to read. Weekly, students stage a play on books they have read, all to foster the notion that "Reading is Cool!" The goal, maintained Sawicki, is to "elevate literacy to the highest respect and adoration, teaching not just to read but a love of reading." Lastly, Excellence places emphasis on ethics through a weekly community meeting.

Sawicki structures his educational agenda around three principles which he hopes have application for co-educational schools. He calls this framework the "Three Pillars of Excellence."

### THREE PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

1. **Academics.** Rigorous and challenging academics form the foundation; students master literacy and computing.
2. **Structure.** High behavior standards become the expectation; students need to be independent and creative thinkers, apt to succeed as they advance to other schools.
3. **Engagement.** Joy leads to engagement — Excellence calls it the the "J-Factor." Schools need to create delight, to become magical places; educators need to make school "cool" while they channel boys' abundant energies into productive pursuits.

**Support through Middle and High School.** Eagle Academy was created to provide high school boys with a college preparatory education in the toughest neighborhood in the Bronx. Defying the status quo — and the conviction that boys' schools were politically incorrect — Eagle Academy is the first all-boys' public high school in New York City in three decades. Anyone can get into Eagle; there are no requirements. But, a child must be lucky — it is available only by lottery. This school, like the best in the nation, is led by strong morals and the belief in the potential of every child, said **David Banks**, President of Eagle Academy Foundation.

Eagle targets high-poverty communities with excessively high rates of incarceration: an Eagle Academy was replicated in Brooklyn to serve grades six through 12, and a third school in Newark, N.J. is planned for Fall 2012 opening. Noting the startling statistic that just seven neighborhoods in New York City supply New York State prisons with 70 percent of their inmates, Banks hopes to disrupt the prison pipeline.

The first precept of Eagle is comprehensive mentoring. For young men growing up without fathers or a responsible male role model, mentoring is essential. Each student is paired with an adult male mentor, inspiring one young Eagle student to coin the now-popular phrase: "A young man without a mentor is like an explorer without a map."

As at Excellence, Eagle schedules more of a student's time. The extra two hours per weekday and three or four hours on Saturday yield 11 extra hours per week and eight more weeks per year of learning. Engaging activities, like debate, chess, robotics and basketball, reduce idle time and could be an effective antidote to the problems kids often find on the streets.

"The earlier we get them, the better," stated Banks, who quips that if he could, he would take them straight from the maternity ward. Like the program papa, Banks discusses how determined Eagle is to stake an interest in the child: "We monitor them through college, and try to provide jobs and other opportunities as they graduate."

Indeed, Bank's college pipeline is unique in the pantheon of ideas to foster academic success. While Eagle boasts of success in enrolling students in colleges across



America, Banks now works to create small cohorts of Eagle students at fewer universities, creating in effect an ideal contingent through four campus years. “The same way they look out for each other from sixth grade, when they arrive at [the college] campus, the young men greet them. By making sure they are each other’s keepers, they get help all the way through.”

**Supporting Success in College.** What could be a better cause for optimism than seeing a young Black boy right at the door of the university? Although many Black students arrive at college underprepared, most are intent on achieving despite the odds, explained Associate Professor **Bryant Marks**, Assistant Professor of Psychology and Director of the Morehouse Male Initiative at Morehouse College. For Marks, the issue of Black male achievement involves understanding the difference between effort and ability.

Morehouse insists on effort. The college seeks to develop Renaissance men with a social conscience and global perspective. To that end, the school developed what is called The Five Wells: “A Morehouse man is well read, well spoken, well traveled, well dressed and well balanced.” Indeed, Morehouse outperforms the national Black college graduation rate of 43 percent, graduating 55 percent of its students.<sup>5</sup>

Marks boasted that Morehouse males show strength in light of challenges. “African-American men are a unique population at risk of experiencing more negative life outcomes — for example, in income, education, health, housing, financing, the legal system — than any other racial or gender group, but are potential exemplars of the American Dream.”

For the last three years, Marks has focused on the Morehouse Male Initiative, which seeks to measure the impact of Morehouse College and factors that increase Black male success in higher education. With a long-range plan to understand Black male behavior, the project examines factors that facilitate positive personal, academic and leadership development.

Take, for example, the classic metric of achievement: grade point average (GPA). While studying significant factors related to GPA, Marks found that putting in

effort, holding a leadership position, positive attitudes toward women or perceiving racism by Whites all have a positive impact; meanwhile, saggy pants, sexual promiscuity, changing a major or participating in a political protest demonstrate a negative impact. Parsing the categories provides some interesting results. While listening to most rap music leads to a negative impact, listening to gospel rap positively impacts GPA.

For Marks, this is not just an exercise. He suggested that his work has significant implications for national policy — for example:

- Develop intense, affordable and possibly mandatory summer pre-college programs for academically underprepared Black male freshmen. Often, people who need preparation the most cannot afford it.
- Employ evidence-based practices and thorough assessment. What works well at Morehouse may not work at other institutions.
- Make advisors aware of the negative indicators of success. College counselors, teachers and mentors should be aware of various indicators of potential problems.



Pictured from left to right: Marian Wright Edelman, CDF; Michael Nettles, ETS; and Russlyn Ali, U.S. Department of Education.

The effort Marks touts may be aided by the factor called engagement. “Engagement is essential to degree attainment,” declared **Shaun Harper**, Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, noting 40 years of consistent supporting evidence. “Students who are actively engaged in educationally

<sup>5</sup> *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* ([http://www.jbhe.com/features/50\\_blackstudent\\_gradrates.html](http://www.jbhe.com/features/50_blackstudent_gradrates.html)), accessed August 23, 2011.

purposeful activities and experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, are more likely than are their disengaged peers to persist through graduation.”

The Black male graduation rate from colleges and universities is 35 percent versus 62 percent for all White students.<sup>6</sup> Why? According to Harper, underperformance points to disengagement. Black male students take fewer notes, spend less time writing papers and completing major assignments, and participate less in campus and leadership activities.

“How do you disrupt the narrative?” he asked. Studying achievers in 40 institutions — e.g., those elected to at least two leadership posts — Harper found a link between engagement and persistence. His analysis shows that active engagement lets Black males adjust and resolve racial, gender and identity conflicts while being better positioned for financial success.

Harper’s analysis leads him to call for policy changes that allow separate race or gender groups to assemble on college campuses. At Penn, Harper meets with a group of Black men in spite of institutional policies against openly meeting together as a single race or gender group. He justifies breaking the rule by saying: “These guys need the space to think about themselves as males, as Black men, and share navigational insights on how to be successful at the university.”

Success in college will lead some students to the ranks of faculty, and that opens up another issue for Black males. **Jerlando F. L. Jackson**, Associate Professor of Higher and Postsecondary Education, studies tenure and hiring practices at The University of Wisconsin-Madison. Jackson is also Director of Wisconsin’s Equity and Inclusion Laboratory, where he examines factors that may contribute to the unequal representation of African-American men in tenured positions. “In general, there appears to be disadvantages in the university workforce for African-American males, who are largely in lower-level positions in less-prestigious institutions.”

Why is this occurring? Looking at both human capital and merit-based performance, Jackson suggests that hiring criteria be restructured. For example, Black faculty need

to sit on key evaluation, performance and decision-making committees.

**Joseph Youngblood II**, Vice Provost and Dean of the John S. Watson School of Public Service at Thomas Edison State College, who has been working in educational policy for more than 30 years, feels the nation is still struggling with the overall acceptance of African-Americans as an integral part of mainstream society. Youngblood said that Black males are “more often than not considered outside of the context of normative human development.” That presents a major challenge for public policy. Youngblood believes that the public policies in New Jersey are insufficient to meet the needs of Black students. Culture and context matter. “Although social factors and cultural contributions are clearly alluded to and taken into consideration ... the disconnect between home and school for many youngsters, and their achievement pursuits, lack a specific theory-driven perspective that simultaneously considers culture, context and normative psycho-social processes,” said Youngblood. He stressed the need for high academic standards, effective teaching, early childhood intervention and early mediation to avert a path to prison and encourage one to college.

## A Call for Public Responsibility

The kind of committee work Jerlando Jackson talks about influencing at the university has counterparts of influence in the community. **Wade Henderson**, President and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, speaks in terms of societal responsibility to communities: “You have a responsibility as a community to make sure that these children have the resources they need. It is immoral to steal from these children under the guise of deficit reduction to deal with the national debt. In a nation with vast resources, this is unconscionable.”

Henderson invokes Leadership Council founder A. Phillip Randolph, who also was part of a triad who founded the first African-American labor union, to further explain this social responsibility. “You have no free seats at the table of life,” Randolph said. “You get what you can take. You keep what you can hold. You can’t take it, and you sure can’t hold it, unless you are organized.” Henderson

<sup>6</sup> *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* ([http://www.jbhe.com/features/50\\_blackstudent\\_gradrates.html](http://www.jbhe.com/features/50_blackstudent_gradrates.html)), accessed August 23, 2011.

added, “We have a responsibility to speak up and organize and to push back. That is absolutely key.”

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*“You have a responsibility as a community to make sure that these children have the resources they need. It is immoral to steal from these children under the guise of deficit reduction to deal with the national debt. In a nation with vast resources, this is unconscionable.”*

— Wade Henderson

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This comes down to a matter of protecting the U.S. economy. “We have to not just make the promise, but make the promise real. The failure to do that is to write off the next generation, not just of young people who will help lead the country, but people we will need in the workforce of tomorrow, trained academically to do the work required to keep the U.S. economy where it stands in the global economy today.” Lastly, Henderson insisted, we must “ensure that there is equitable funding at the state level to ensure that investments are made consistent with the needs of the communities we serve.”

For example, New Jersey is struggling to achieve equity in funding its schools. David Sciarra, Executive Director of the Education Law Center, recently had a victory on the N.J. Supreme Court in appealing the state’s decision to cut \$500 million from state aid to education. Equal educational opportunity and funding equity go hand in hand. Poor communities will not be able to meet the needs of their students if adequate funding is denied to the community’s schools.

## Public Policy Solutions to Black Achievement Challenges

When asked where the money could come from to improve Black student achievement, Tulane’s Barbarin did not hesitate to weigh in on public policy. “Take the money from corrections,” he suggested, “some for families and some for early childhood education. You need the best teachers in pre-K, kindergarten and first grade, as

well as policies that focus on poor kids particularly. Go back to policies that allow for multi-SES classes that make it easier for kids to attack each gap in America. We have to attack community poverty at the same time. How do we get America to divert resources from overseas wars to communities here in America? And, even if it means going into debt, we can’t forget the unemployed.”

## Legislative Policy Considerations

New Jersey State Senator Ronald Rice noted that he is proud to speak from a Black perspective about the achievement challenges that he sees in New Jersey. Rice notes that the Black community needs to seize leadership on educational issues that affect its members. “We have to identify why these kids are struggling with learning. We need to identify who is making these decisions.”

Rice finds that the charter school movement is problematic because it diverts funds away from solutions to fix problems in the public schools, where most Black males attend school. “To me, it creates unnecessary debates about charter schools versus traditional public schools and wastes time and money that could be used better to correct the problems once they are identified in public schools where 90 percent of Black students attend, and will always attend.”

Senator Rice highlights a number of policy objectives that would enhance Black male achievement:

- Abolish the law allowing 16-year-olds to drop out of school.
- Create a way to compel parent involvement.
- Support early childhood, cognitive skill development and academic learning programs.
- Create adult programs for Black males to upgrade their education to help children at home. This could involve reading programs for adult males with a less-than-high school reading level.

## Supporting the Public in Public Education

**Paul Tractenberg** also supports public education. The Board of Governors’ Distinguished Service Professor of

Law at Rutgers University has worked for equal education for New Jersey's urban school children for nearly 40 years. For him, our nation's under-resourced public school system is being challenged on several fronts. One of his concerns is the threat of charter schools.

Stanford's CREDO (Center for Research on Education Outcomes) Report on charter schools found that 17 percent of charter schools outperform regular schools and that 37 percent underperform.<sup>7</sup> So how can this underperformance threaten public schools? The answer is money, and the threat is privatization. If you are an entrepreneur, the 6 billion dollar pot of public education money is a pretty tempting target, said Tractenberg.

In the court battle of *Abbott v. Burke*, the state of New Jersey reversed the trend of underfunding education for the state's poorest children. Now, all three- and four-year-olds in the 31 most troubled districts have full day kindergarten. "New Jersey, under *Abbott*, has by far the best early childhood program in the country," said Tractenberg. Another major accomplishment of *Abbott*, according to Tractenberg, is substantial regular education funding for disadvantaged students. "We flipped what was an outrageous situation of spending a half, to a third, to a quarter as much on disadvantaged students as on advantaged. No other state has done that. That's at risk."

"Somehow, there is money to fund vouchers, or 'Opportunity Scholarships.' Twenty-five percent of those are headed to kids already in private schools who never set foot in a public school in their lives. This is an ideology masquerading as concern for poor minority children and their civil rights and the libertarian interest in choice," said Tractenberg.

## Improving School Policies

In his piercingly direct manner, Associate Professor of Higher Education **Terrell Strayhorn** at Ohio State University addressed the public policy implications of the achievement gap. "For me, public policies should establish support programs that would establish a sense of belonging in schools. The goal should be to reduce the isolation that Black males report in school

settings." Isolation may be a facet of racism. Statistics reveal that about 60 percent of Black students expect to experience racism on campus — including high-achieving Black students at prestigious schools. He calls first for policies that reduce racism, next for policies that abolish the perception of Black males as athletes.

"What does that do to my psyche, every time you tell me that I must be an athlete?" Strayhorn asked. "You tell me that I am not fit for the classroom. I'm not fit to be in the front of the classroom. I'm not fit to write the article. I must always consume the knowledge that you produce about my people, about me, myself . . . So we need policies that get rid of that."

He also urges the adoption of policies that deal fairly with discipline. Recently, a teacher confessed that when she has a problem with "Johnny," she says: "Johnny sit down." When there's a problem with the proverbial "Tyrone," she says: "Oh no! I don't mess with Tyrone. Tyrone could jump and skip all over the classroom, the worst thing I'm going to do is say, 'Tyrone, go to the detention center' or 'Go to the discipline room.'"

Seventy-two percent of Black boys are suspended at least once in their careers, noted DOE Assistant Secretary Ali, whose office is investigating disciplinary practices at school systems where Black boys are being punished to a greater extent than other students. UNC's Iruka conducted research that sheds some light on why this happens. Beyond academics, Iruka looks at how children approach learning — for example, their ability to be curious, persistent or initiate their own learning. When teachers rate students, "we see that teachers don't see boys as persistent or having self control. This is in kindergarten! Either the boys are different or they are seen differently," Iruka explained. The bottom line is that when teachers think a child can't control himself, he gets transferred into special education classrooms.

Strayhorn, too, speaks to his frustration with a system that manufactures "bad boys." We need to understand why Black boys are severely punished disproportionately. When Black boys are treated as bad boys in school, "we then produce boys who get swept into the juvenile justice system and then become castaways."

<sup>7</sup> Center for Research on Education Outcomes, *Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*, Stanford University, June 2009.

## Some Promising Practices

Former Superintendent of Schools **Jerry Weast** revamped the school system in Montgomery County, Maryland. Weast led the largest and most diverse school district in Maryland, and one of the largest in the country. During his 12-year tenure, the school system has become increasingly more minority and poor, growing by 25,000 students. Yet the more diverse student body has excelled. During that period, the highest SAT scores in the history of the district were registered. The district has 2.5 percent of all the children in America who scored a 3 on an AP® test, and has nearly one percent of all the Latino students in America who scored a 3 on an AP test.

“If you don’t think race is an issue — get real,” warned Weast. The district confronted the issue of racial sorting — all minority students clustered together — by using time more efficiently. “Our enemy in a sorting system is time,” Weast said.

The Montgomery County school system has some of the wealthiest and some of the poorest children in America. However, income does not influence class size in the traditional way — just the opposite. “The kids in rich areas go to classes of 25 to 27; the kids in the poor area go to classes with 12 to 15.” In addition, poor areas get the first pick of teachers. “So this is not for the timid, right? And we’ve been doing that for 12 years,” Weast noted, adding that this was all done in the name of evenhandedness. You have to have uneven funding if you want evenness in achievement.

“We don’t do remediation,” Weast reported. “We do acceleration. We don’t talk down to children. We invite them. We raffle bicycles for kids who come all the time; bring mothers in. We talk about race. We have study circles. We teach poor people to kick my butt — because rich people know how. This is serious work. You will do what it takes to even out your front lawn. We will do what it takes if you want to even out a school system. And, America better wake up and we better do what it takes or we’re going to be a Third World country.”

Certainly, the school superintendent wields power, but a seat on the school board influences the discussion of Black male achievement in yet another way. From his perch as a middle school science teacher, principal

of both public and charter schools, professor and chair, and former president of the Teaneck (N.J.) Board of Education, **Henry Johnson Pruitt** now serves as Trustee on the Board. It was his idea to convene the first ETS conference on Black male achievement.

Pruitt warns that our country pays a price when we ignore the problem of unproductive Black youth. “If we don’t find a way to reach and motivate all our students now, the international education ranking of America will continue to decline and the prison population will continue to go up.”

Black males, Pruitt maintains, are in bad shape. Echoing other educators who say that all children possess the capacity to learn, Pruitt asked, “Why don’t they?” He proposes that the reason is a lack of effort by students and negative peer pressure. Teachers, he warns, need to acknowledge achievement in more clever and engaging ways. For outstanding achievement in sports, students win huge trophies. “Can’t we improve on a piece of paper for the valedictorian?” he asked. Pruitt suggested a list of potential improvements:

- **Revamp curriculum. Toss out dry, antiquated textbooks and tap into student passions (e.g, for technology).**
- **Set high expectations. “Smart is not something that you are, smart is something you can get.”**
- **Seek student input. High school students should feel that their opinion counts.**
- **Teach study skills and techniques. Teach skills to all, do not relegate them to remedial courses.**
- **Engage community resources. Involve the churches, community centers and barbershops and use the resources more effectively.**
- **Revisit assessments. In America, 50 different states have 50 different assessments. Policy wonks should define national objectives and create one set of standards. Then keep these in place for a reasonable amount of time so districts can meet them.**
- **Narrow the achievement gap.**

## Re-envisioning Education

**Edmund Gordon**, Professor Emeritus at both Yale University and Columbia Teacher's College, draws a parallel between education and public health. We do not measure health by how many good hospitals there are. You do something about pollution, sewers, garbage and "teach people to know how to use their own resources to maintain their own health" by exercising and eating properly. The same must be true for education. "How do we prepare young people not just to fit in and survive in a dysfunctional system, but how to change the system to be more appropriate to their own needs?"

Where do you begin? From a policy perspective, Gordon says society should start early in the life of a child — perhaps at the delivery. "Evidence seems to suggest you can influence the course of life if you begin earlier. But it almost appears to be never too late." Some higher achievers did not get their epiphany until they were in their 30s and 40s.

Meanwhile, some high school students confuse respect with reputation. Black teens want respect, but without success in school, they may substitute the pursuit of reputation, which is easier to acquire with less persistence. Students need to understand how to act in their own self interests, even when there is resistance from the Black youth themselves.

Gordon asks us to re-envision what education is supposed to do for our young people — to re-envision what success means. "My prescription for education for Black men is to take that resistance and to enable it. Help young men become competent resisters. A part of their education ought to teach them what you do about a system that is not working for you: You change it."

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—Edmund Gordon

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## Moving Forward

Chinese Taoist philosopher Lao Tsu stated, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." In 2011, ETS President Kurt Landgraf committed ETS to extend itself beyond assessment development and policy research that identifies achievement gaps and to work with community organizations to help close those gaps. ETS's partnership with CDF is a step toward improving the plight of Black boys as they begin their journey from early childhood through adolescence and beyond. As part of its collaboration with CDF, ETS has committed funds to support a new CDF Freedom Schools® program exclusively for Black males in Newark, N.J., with a grant to Communities in Schools of New Jersey.

Among the institutions that serve Black boys in particular, the *CDF Freedom Schools* program ranks high. The *CDF Freedom Schools* program is rooted in the civil rights movement and the work conducted in 1964 in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. Since 1995, the *CDF Freedom Schools* program has reached about 90,000 low-income children, and 9,000 college students and recent graduates have been trained to serve as teachers and mentors.

**The *CDF Freedom Schools* program provides summer and after-school enrichment through a model curriculum that supports children and families around five essential components: high-quality academic enrichment; parent and family involvement; social action and civic engagement; intergenerational servant leadership development; and nutrition, health and mental health.**

For Edelman, the operative word is freedom: "We are trying to free them from illiteracy, low expectations, and build empowered children. We are trying to reconnect the community to its children," said the CDF president. She points to the lie that children do not want to read. "You give them interesting books, and give them hope; they will read. We want to infiltrate the culture of the public schools and make learning fun." Edelman said her goal is to double the number of *CDF Freedom Schools* over the next five years. She wants one on every Black college campus, "so

that children can see college and not prison in their future. You can't be what you can't imagine and don't know."

This summer, the CDF Freedom Schools® program served nearly 10,000 students according to the national director Middleton-Hairston, and partnered with 105 organizations at 151 program sites in 27 states and 87 cities. Middleton-Hairston points to the success CDF is having with the *CDF Freedom Schools* program, engaging young children in learning, staunching summer reading loss, and engaging young adults in teaching and giving back to their communities and creating a hopeful future.

Where do we go from here? Nettles answered, "We continue to stay in touch and network. Colleagues came from all across the United States to be at the conferences, and they work in colleges and in organizations all trying to have an influence on Black male youth."

As ETS President Kurt Landgraf noted in his remarks, "This country simply cannot afford to write off vast swaths of human potential. Equity and morality aside, the economics alone require that we work to improve the academic performance of all groups, for the ultimate benefit of us all."

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*"This country simply cannot afford to write off vast swaths of human potential. Equity and morality aside, the economics alone require that we work to improve the academic performance of all groups, for the ultimate benefit of us all."*

— Kurt Landgraf

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Looking forward, former New Jersey Acting Education Commissioner Rochelle Hendricks suggested, "In the 21st century, let's abandon every notion and construct that we have about what our young people need. Let's listen to them, let's respond to the research and let's encourage the kind of research we heard about today ... and engage that research to design a system that is not yet imagined. Then maybe we will give our children what they deserve."

Yet, it is not just what children deserve that is at issue. It is not just social justice, but a question of what works for America. Who is to say that a poor Black boy we are failing might discover a cure for cancer, solve our energy

dilemma, or write a hilarious script? How can we meet the challenges facing our nation in the 21st century if we do not develop all of our children's talent to the fullest? It is not just in the child's interest to educate him or her. It is in our own interests. These young Black children are not just the community's children. They are all our children.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was once asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" He answered, "More than being my brother's keeper, I must understand that I am my brother's brother." And, are not we brothers and sisters all?



## *In this Issue*

*(continued from page 1)*

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The conference explored:

- Connections between early brain development and later achievement
- Advantages of a well-designed pre-K-to-third-grade continuum
- Promising policy initiatives that address the holistic needs of young Black boys

Information on this conference, including agenda, speaker biographies, PowerPoint® presentations and video, is available at [http://www.ets.org/sponsored\\_events/2011\\_achievement\\_gap/](http://www.ets.org/sponsored_events/2011_achievement_gap/).

The earlier conference, "**Climbing the Academic Achievement Ladder: Promoting the Success of Black Males**," was held at the Chauncey Conference Center at ETS headquarters in Princeton, N.J., on November 13, 2010. This conference focused on the academic achievement of Black males from kindergarten through university. Attended by more than 200 persons, the conference was sponsored in partnership with the **New Jersey Department of Education**, the **Center for Effective School Practices** at Rutgers University, and the **Metropolitan Center for Urban Education** at New York University's Steinhardt School. The conference featured presentations by 21 academics, practitioners, government officials and researchers.



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## *In this Issue*

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Conference topics included:

- Research on keys to Black male academic achievement and motivation
- Progressive schools and communities of and for Black male academic achievement
- The roles of fathers and families

- Public policy solutions to Black male achievement issues

Information on this conference, including agenda, speaker biographies, PowerPoint presentations and video, is available at [http://www.ets.org/sponsored\\_events/academic\\_achievement\\_ladder/](http://www.ets.org/sponsored_events/academic_achievement_ladder/).