

Black Male Achievement

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Defining the Vision

February marks the beginning of Black History month. What history will be written in regard to today's Black males and their abysmal performance in U.S. public education? Who will be their champions? Mark your calendar for a joining of champions at the National Council for the Education of Black Children conference to be held in New Orleans from April 16-19, 2008 where some of the leading scholars and practitioners of Black male achievement programs will be gathered.

Becoming a champion for Black male achievement requires that you develop a vision to become one. Conceptualizing such a vision for your classroom, household, school, program, or church will require discussions with, and input from, the stakeholders who impact and influence the lives of the young men within your community. A shared vision by parents, teachers, coaches, counselors, and law enforcement personnel will translate into shared

goals and common strategies. This month's newsletter is taken from Chapter 2: Vision, in the book, "Empowering African-American Males: A Guide to Increasing Black Male Achievement."

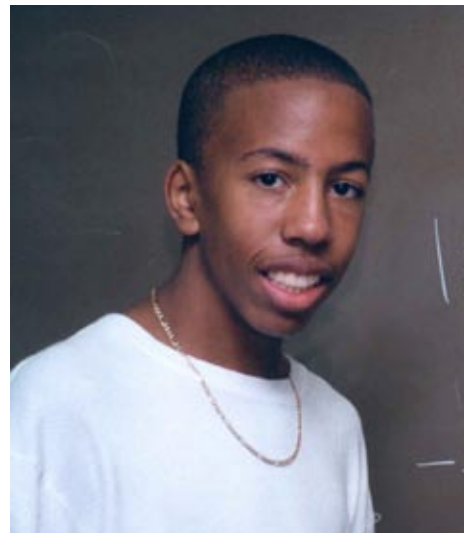
Clarifying the Vision

"What Blacks are now being taught does not bring their minds into harmony with life as they must face it. When a Black student works his way through college by polishing shoes, he does not think of making a special study of the science underlying the production and distribution of leather and its products that he may some day figure in this sphere. The Black boy sent to college by a mechanic seldom dreams of learning mechanical engineering to build upon the foundation his father had laid, that in years to come he may figure as a contractor or consulting engineer."

- Dr. Carter G. Woodson

No matter how widely the visions vary between teachers and parents, administrators and mentors, counselors and coaches, or the school board and the school community, there must be a willingness to collaborate between the adult stakeholders before there is any real opportunity for anyone's vision to be realized.

- *The teacher who envisions a young man reaching proficiency should support the efforts of a parent who envisions his scoring above*



the 90th percentile on standardized testing.

- *The parent who envisions his or her son graduating from high school should support the efforts of a counselor who envisions his attending and graduating from college.*
- *The coach who envisions a player enrolling in basic classes to remain academically eligible should support the efforts of a parent who envisions her son enrolling in college prep classes.*
- *The principal who envisions meeting the school improvement goals of a 10 percent increase in reading scores should support the efforts of a teacher who envisions "Stand and Deliver Fridays" to motivate young men to read a book a week.*

The vision my wife and I have for our sons has, in many cases, not been totally understood by friends, family, or by all of their teachers. We have been accused of pushing them too hard, having expectations which are unreachable, and holding them to standards which are unattainable. Fortunately, most of those who have not totally understood our passion, our purpose, or our expectations, have generally collaborated with and supported us in our efforts. However, be assured, the greater your vision for the success of Black males, the greater the number of people who will tell you it is unrealistic and who will actively undermine your efforts to achieve it! Our parental vision, together with the collaboration of our sons' teachers, principals, counselors, and coaches has paved the way to their academic record, standardized test scores, personal achievement, and overall school success.

Our sons, as is typical of most young men, have not always enthusiastically studied, prepared themselves, or trained. It has been the combined efforts of parents who have pushed them, teachers who have stretched them, and coaches who have tirelessly worked them—all driven by a vision that they were capable. The vision that you, as a parent, teacher, counselor, coach, principal, or mentor affirm will influence the consciousness, beliefs, and goals the young men in your classroom, program or on your team will eventually set for themselves. The scope of their dreams will be greatly influenced by the scope of your beliefs, which will be reflected in the affirmation of your vision.

What are Your Beliefs?



While the adjacent sign welcoming students who have been admitted into Yale could have been that of Howard, Hampton, or Morehouse, I chose Yale because I believe that if we prepare Black males for acceptance into the Ivy League then they will have a choice of every college and university in the United States and abroad.

Beliefs + Experiences = What You Do

Your beliefs and your experiences have already determined the focus of your mission and now, your beliefs will become more evident through the scope of your vision. Your beliefs and experiences will be reflected in the language you use, lessons you teach, stories you tell, alliances you develop, and the lengths to which you look for information, ideas, strategies, and support. Black males are among the least-likely students to be identified as Talented and Gifted and they are over 600 percent more likely to be identified as having a learning or emotional disability. Have we accepted the mission to look for their gifts and talents?

- *Few would disbelieve a Black male breaking 11 seconds in a 100-meter dash, but could those same people believe in his breaking 30 on the ACT or 700 on each component of the SAT?*
- *Few would disbelieve a Black male running 100 yards in a football game, but could those same people believe in his taking all honors and AP classes during any given school year?*

Jonathan Kozol, in *Savage Inequalities*, quotes a Chicago businessman who said:

"It doesn't make sense to offer something that most of these urban kids will never use, no one expects these ghetto kids to go to college. Most of them are lucky if they're even literate. If we can teach some useful skills, get them to stay in school and graduate, and maybe into jobs, we're giving them the most that they can hope for."

In stark contrast, at Marva Collins' Westside Preparatory School on Chicago's West Side, they embodied a vision which many (particularly this Chicago businessman) would find impossible to embrace:

"All students at Westside Preparatory School must also take an oral pledge before the entire group that they will never bring disgrace to the school and that they will, at all times, uphold the moral and academic standards of Westside Preparatory School and that any student who is guilty of omission in this area does

not deserve the right to be called a Westside Prepian. The academic program at Westside Preparatory is nothing less than the basic three R's mixed with a total program that teaches every child that they are unique, special, and that they are too bright to ever be less than all that they can be. The 'I will not let you fail' statement is one that they seldom hear elsewhere. We also hold parent classes, and we teach the very same things to parents that we teach our students."

According to the data, many Black males are living in poverty, being raised in single-parent households, and are below grade level in one or more academic areas. Clarifying your focus will determine whether you are focused on:

- *their deficits or your capacity;*
- *their inability or your ability;*
- *their foolishness or your wisdom;*
- *their childishness or your maturity;* or
- *their lack of knowledge or your wealth of knowledge.*
- *Will your conversations focus on high school graduation or college matriculation?*
- *Will your academic support focus on getting A's and B's, or passing?*
- *Will you encourage them to take the most academically challenging courses or suggest easy or remedial classes?*
- *Will you allow them to submit inferior work or will you encourage them to strive*

for a higher standard?

- *Will you allow them to succumb to the de-intellectualizing of today's youth through hip-hop culture or will you utilize every opportunity to challenge their thinking and develop their critical-thinking skills?*

If your vision leads young men to a level of achievement higher than what they have historically experienced or a level beyond what has been customary within your school or program, you must provide the necessary support and encouragement to sustain them once they begin such a journey. Black males, who become top academic achievers will find themselves separated, and at times isolated, from their peers. Whether they experience cultural isolation in an elementary-through-high school setting or find themselves among only a few Black students on a college campus, you will be challenged to recognize this situation and to provide the needed support and coping mechanisms. As previously stated, there is a community-wide expectation of young Black men excelling on football fields and basketball courts, while there is no such expectation of their excelling in advanced or gifted classes.

Is it practical to encourage college for a student who is two years below grade level in reading? Is it realistic to encourage a young Black man who dreams of becoming President of the United States? Do we dare demand his submitting quality work when he can barely write his name? Do

we dare take time to talk about his dreams when his school is on the 'low-performing' list and students are failing to meet the state-mandated improvement levels?

Perhaps a more pressing question is, what should we do for the young man who lacks hope? Answering such questions will determine the scope of your vision, and it is your vision that will determine the goals you set, the discussions you engage in, and the strategies you choose to implement.

College: The Ultimate Goal

Much more can be done to inspire and encourage Black males to aspire toward college. Once having inspired them, teachers, parents, coaches, mentors, and counselors must create the support mechanisms to prepare them to succeed in academically rigorous classes. The doorway to college may be opened as a result of their athletic, artistic, musical, dramatic, dance, or academic abilities. This is why early identification and nurturing of each young man's unique talents and gifts is critically important. Our older son's way to college began with his first-grade passion for art. Our younger son's fifth-grade talent in acting may become one of the special attributes that paves the way for his college admission. However, it is academically rigorous course work that will help them to succeed once they get there.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's data, if young men are encouraged to



pursue math and science beyond algebra I and chemistry, they are substantially more likely to attend college. A vision of college-level achievement will directly impact the level of planning by parents and encouragement and intervention by school personnel. The U.S. Department of Education's white paper, *Mathematics Equals Opportunity*, examined the impact of middle school math and science classes on college enrollment through a National Education Longitudinal Study of 26,000 public and private school 8th-grade students from 1988 through 1996. The report found, low-income students who take algebra I and geometry are almost 300 percent more likely to attend college as those who do not.

A recent analysis by the U.S. Department of Education indicates that high school students who take algebra, geometry, and other rigorous mathematics courses are more likely to go on to college. This is true regardless of their family income. In fact, the benefit of taking rigorous courses is greatest for students from low-income families. The key to understanding mathematics is taking algebra or courses covering algebraic concepts by the end of the eighth grade. Achievement at that stage gives students an important advantage in taking rigorous high school mathematics and science courses. However,

many eighth- and ninth-graders may already be behind in their course selection to get on to the road to college. Some schools do not offer everyone a full selection of challenging courses, or because not all students are prepared for and encouraged to enroll. The results of the recent Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) confirm that many students enter high school without a solid grounding in mathematics, closing doors very early for further education and better careers.

The report found:

- *83 percent of all students (71 percent of low-income students) who take algebra I and geometry go on to college within two years of their scheduled high school graduation while only 36 percent of all students (27 percent of low-income students) who do not take algebra I and geometry courses go on to college.*
- *89 percent of students who take chemistry in high school go on to college while only 43 percent of students who do not take chemistry go to college.*
- *60 percent of students who take calculus in high school took algebra in the eighth grade.*

The study further determined, enrollment in gatekeeper courses in eighth grade, such as algebra and foreign language, helps students reach higher levels in the mathematics and foreign language pipelines. For example, students

who enroll in algebra as eighth-graders were more likely to reach high-level math courses (i.e., algebra III, trigonometry, or calculus) in high school than students who do not enroll in algebra as eighth-graders. The under enrollment of Black males in such courses contributes, in part, to the disparity between Black male and female college enrollment (63 percent female versus 37 percent male) which is the largest male-female disparity of all ethnic groups (26 percentage points)!

The many societal, community, and peer issues distracting and discouraging Black males from academic pursuits necessitate their hearing the college-bound message early and often. Giving young men a college-bound focus passes the baton of hope and gives them ownership of their own future. Parents can reinforce this message by replacing some of their son's FUBU, Phat Farm, Sean John, and other hip-hop shirts with college T-shirts and their NBA and NFL jerseys with college jerseys. Young men can be encouraged to adorn the T-shirts representing their favorite rapper's alma mater. (Sean "P. Diddy" Combs attended Howard University.) Gather brochures and view books from colleges and universities, provide frequent opportunities for young men to be exposed to college graduates and visit college campuses.

Teachers can create a wall within their classroom of paraphernalia from local universities, their alma mater, the alma maters of popular athletes and entertainers and other teachers on staff. Teachers can also look for every

In Closing

opportunity to discuss a student's college-bound dreams, connect a student's interests to college-level study, and continually reinforce class selection and standardized test scores within the context of meeting college admission standards.

Black professionals, particularly graduates of HBCUs, need to get out of the boardroom and into the classroom. Radio DJ, Tom Joyner, comments:

"Intellects like to sit around and discuss whether the need for Black colleges still exists. To that question my response is: 'Don't make me cuss.' We need HBCUs for the same reason we need Black churches, Black radio stations, Black television networks, and Black beauty supply stores. HBCUs meet our needs because they belong to us. They are a part of us. They are us. And we also need HBCUs because Black students who attend them are more likely to graduate. And graduates of HBCUs are more likely to be recruited and hired by major corporations than those who attend White colleges and universities ... Those of us who attended HBCUs ought to be singing their praises wherever we go. We need to be out there talking to youth groups, speaking at high schools and trade schools, and communicating the benefits of attending an HBCU. Dig out that FAMU sweatshirt and wear it whether it still covers that belly or not. Be loud and proud of your alma mater."

School-based strategies must be designed to influence the emotional, social, and intellectual development of Black males in ways that will enable them to overcome the negative influences of peer pressure and media images. Churches, coaches, and after-school programs must develop strategies to inspire the highest academic achievement and affirm the highest educational attainment for their players and members. Parents must develop a vision of a life of hope and promise and be uncompromising in their demands for Standard English usage, social skill development, and developing their sons intellectual and critical-thinking skills. If you are a mentor, coach, or pastor, you must champion Black male achievement by modeling the highest standards of manhood and communicate your uncompromising expectations of their promise and potential. You must prepare yourselves with stories, parables, and anecdotes when witnessing the inevitable ill-mannered behavior, non-Standard English usage, and lack of respect and responsibility demonstrated daily by Black males in programs, classrooms, corridors, and at the breakfast table. Your vision will determine your expectations and your expectations will determine your actions.

Next month, developing the climate and culture to nurture Black male achievement.

Sincerely,

Mychal Wynn

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