

Black Male Achievement

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Page 1

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Defining the Mission

Happy new year! Through the August, September, and November newsletters I presented data and provided strategies pertaining to Black male achievement. In August I stressed the need for advocacy and the importance of analyzing the data.

In September I paid tribute to the late Dr. Asa Hilliard, III, analyzed NAEP results, high school exit exam pass rates, high school graduation rates, special education placements, suspensions, and the importance of looking beyond 'AYP' to rigorous course enrollment and college graduation.

In November I outlined responsive strategies for reversing the trends of low AP course enrollment and low NAEP, SAT, and ACT performance. As we begin 2008 with greater hopes and higher expectations for Black male achievement I will be taking excerpts from each of the six components outlined in the book, *“Empowering African-American Males: A Guide to Increasing Black*

Male Achievement.”

It is my hope, that by focusing on each of these components over the course of the ensuing six months that District Office and local school administrators will engage in thoughtful debriefing and culturally-responsive pre-planning in preparation for substantially increasing Black male achievement during the 2008/09 school year.

Clarifying the Mission

Educators, activists, and assorted sages have given us scores of maxims that extol the value of education, but the most poignant words I have ever encountered on the necessity of education for African Americans were those of a Mississippi slave owner who in 1832 wrote: “Knowledge and slavery are incompatible.” Indeed, they are. And thus, it is not difficult to understand why at one point in American history it was illegal to teach slaves to read and write. Just as the denial of education is a proven method of subjugating a people, there can be little doubt that access to education is potentially a definitive means to the self-enlightenment and self-realization of a people, which in turn spells liberation. By that I mean liberation from all the ‘isms’: racism, sexism, provincialism, and the individualism that prevents us from building sturdy Black bridges.

- Johnnetta B. Cole



Before forging ahead to identify problems, conceptualize solutions, or develop implementation plans, you must go through the painstaking task of clarifying your mission, i.e., purpose. Contemplating, conceptualizing, and clarifying your mission is a time-consuming, self-reflecting, gut-wrenching task. It requires, amid the chaos and confusion of raising and teaching children, you stop and reflect on whether you are doing the right thing, going in the right direction, or have any real understanding of the challenges, hopes, and dreams of the Black males whom you are raising, teaching, counseling, coaching, or mentoring. Without devoting the needed time to clarifying the mission, teachers are hired, the football season begins, schools open, programs are implemented, and subsequent failure is virtually guaranteed. This outcome does not necessarily mean people are not working hard, the adult stakeholders in the school community

do not care, or that groups of people are not putting in a lot of time and energy into trying to help these young men. The problem is, we are so busy doing things, we never stop long enough to clarify what we want to accomplish, what types of men we want to develop, and where we ultimately want these young men to go as a result of all of the energy and effort we are devoting to them.

A widely held misconception by parents, teachers, counselors, and coaches is that the exercise of developing a mission statement is something school districts, businesses, and organizations engage in—not something that is important to parenting, teaching, counseling, or coaching. Nothing can be further from the truth. Households without a clear sense of mission have no compass to point the direction toward resolving disputes, directing the family's resources, or identifying the programs and support mechanisms needed to support family and individual goals. Classroom teachers who open the school year without a clear sense of mission cannot conceptualize a holistic set of strategies, which integrate classroom management, lesson design, support materials, parent conferences, cooperative grouping, daily procedures, relationships with children and families, or grading practices and methodology. Counselors without a clear sense of mission will fail to fully understand the circumstances and obstacles confronting Black males and what is required to move them into the ranks of exemplifying excellence in character and achievement. Coaches without a clear sense of

mission can never fully understand the extraordinary opportunity they have to shape the nature, values, and character of a Black boy's life from boyhood into manhood.

What is Your Role?



There are many roles we, as caring adults, can and must play as we influence the cognitive growth, intellectual development, emotional maturation, and spiritual awareness of the young men in our care. The following roles represent some of the most significant adult influences within any school community:

Parent: The role of parents is unquestionably the most important influence in helping a young man along his journey from boyhood to manhood. How young men are prepared to respond to the many challenges, pitfalls, dangers, and disappointments of growing up Black is either consciously strengthened or unconsciously neglected. The way to academic achievement is either paved through parental expectations

and involvement or sabotaged through parental neglect, excuses, or low expectations. Since the majority of Black males are being raised in single parent, female-headed households, the challenges of parenting and teaching them how to become men are magnified.

Teacher: During their primary and secondary school-age years from kindergarten through the twelfth grade, young men will spend more time with a teacher or group of teachers than they will with their own parent(s)—1260 hours per year and 16,380 total hours by the time they graduate from high school (more, if they have been retained a grade). At the high school level, Black males who are involved in extracurricular activities may spend as many as 16 hours a day in school-related activities resulting in 11,520 hours of influence teachers and coaches may have during a young man's four years of high school. At the collegiate level, the lessons, discussions, mentors, and role models will directly impact a young man's journey into manhood. At all levels, teachers, undeniably, have tremendous power to inspire academic achievement and connect the sterile environment of classroom learning to the interests, passions, and aspirations of the young men.

Counselor: At all levels of schooling, i.e., elementary, middle, high school, alternative school, junior college, or college, counselors have tremendous power to influence the academic pursuits, career aspirations, and personal development of young men. However, the unfortunate

reality is, if Black males do not belong to one of three groups—high academic achievers, low academic achievers, or discipline problems—they are less likely to develop meaningful contact with, and thereby benefit from the wealth of knowledge and experiences of the school's counselor. The school's counselor has tremendous power in influencing program opportunities for students and parents and providing exposure to a wide variety of support programs, as well as educational, personal development, and career opportunities which expand a child's world beyond the local community on to a global stage.

Coach: Coaches, at all levels of schooling, have tremendous influence over the lives of young men, and at the professional level, over the lives of men and families. From AAU/USATF athletic teams to high school, coaches are highly influential within the lives of young men and have perhaps the greatest influence in directing college-bound athletes toward colleges and into relationships with college coaches. As such, they oftentimes may have more power than parents and peers to develop the character traits, belief system, and future direction of young men.

Administrator: Principals and assistant principals, as vanguards of the school community, are in a position to exert tremendous influence over the lives of young men. The leadership skills, mission, vision, core values, and guiding principles communicated by administrative leadership can have far-reaching effects beyond the school and throughout the local community.

Mentor: Persons in any of the aforementioned roles may function as mentors; however, the role of mentoring is identified not by blood (i.e., parent) or professional duty (i.e., teacher, counselor, coach) but by choice. More so than any other role, mentors have the power to determine the scope of contact, nature of the relationship, and length of engagement that ultimately determines the breath and depth of influence they will have within the lives of young men and their families. As in the case of coaches, mentors have the capacity to exert tremendous influence over the consciousness, character, dreams, and aspirations of young men, i.e., stay in school and get a good job, or excel in school, go to college, and participate in shaping the future of America.

Tutor: Tutors, not only provide support for academic achievement, social skills development, and physical development, i.e., math and science tutors, reading specialists, athletic trainers and nutritionists, but may be a significant factor in determining student achievement levels.

Decision-Maker: While each of the aforementioned roles certainly qualify as decision-makers, this category represents such individuals as politicians, business leaders, superintendents, school board members, foundation chairpersons, and university presidents. Those individuals, by their power to influence policy or direct the expenditure of resources, can profoundly affect the lives of young men and their families.

As previously stated, there are many more roles that have influence on the lives of young

men and in fact, many people will serve in multiple roles, e.g., parent-counselor-coach-mentor or teacher-counselor-mentor. Having a clear sense of your role helps to further clarify your sphere of influence, which in turn provides the focal point from which to develop your mission.

Identify Your Level of Influence

While your role may have a general societal definition—parents should raise and nurture children, teachers should provide effective classroom instruction, coaches should teach the skills pertinent to a particular sport—the scope and magnitude of the problems confronting Black males mandate the expanding of traditional roles to meet a far greater set of needs. As a result, the role you play, together with your desired level of influence, provides the framework for further clarifying and defining your mission.

For example, consider the level of influence you would like to have in a young man's life:

- *academic achievement (e.g., honor roll, gifted placement, advanced class enrollment, high school graduation, college enrollment);*
- *academic knowledge (i.e., basic, proficiency, above average, disciplinary expert, master);*
- *esthetic/cultural development (e.g., creativity, self-expression, appreciation of the arts);*



- *self-knowledge (i.e., African Diaspora, Black history, family lineage);*
- *morall/spiritual development (i.e., fairness, citizenship, service, independent decision-making, taking responsibility);*
- *personal development (e.g., social skills, being well-groomed, personal hygiene, strong handshake, well-mannered behavior, strong work ethic);*
- *leadership skills (e.g., critical-thinking, independent decision-making, team captain, club officer, mentor, tutor, guest speaker); and*
- *athletic achievement (e.g., skill development, knowledge of diet and nutrition, strength conditioning, excellence in a particular sport, college-qualifying times or skill level).*

Understanding your role and defining the level of influence you want to have within the lives of the young men within your sphere of influence will challenge preexisting, and oftentimes, long-held beliefs, as to your capacity as well as the very potential of the

young men themselves. You cannot affirm your being influential in their gaining admissions to college if you previously believed in their not having the intellectual capacity or family support to do so. Football coaches are challenged to affirm their ability to influence the social and academic behaviors of players if they have previously believed peer pressure to outweigh the influence of coaches. Teachers are challenged to affirm students' ability to qualify for the honor roll and achieve a level of knowledge qualifying them as disciplinary experts if teachers have previously believed parents' lack of academic support as the root cause of low student achievement. In the case of parents, if a father or mother lacking a high school education, has previously believed only children of educated parents can attend college, he or she is unlikely to demand a college preparatory track of study in high school or communicate an expectation of college enrollment to his or her son after high school. Whether a coach, teacher, or parent, the scope of your influence in the lives of young men will be based, not on what you know, but what you believe.

In Closing

As previously stated, the process of clarifying and articulating a mission as it relates to your school, classroom, program, athletic team, social services agency, or household can be a painstakingly time-consuming process. No doubt you will be tempted to avoid it altogether. However, as Stephen Covey states in *Principle-Centered Leadership*, "There are no short

cuts."

"Can you go two weeks without milking the cow and then get out there and milk like crazy? Can you 'forget' to plant in the spring or goof off all summer and then hit the ground real hard in the fall to bring in the harvest? We might laugh at such ludicrous approaches in agriculture, but then in an academic environment we might cram to get the grades and degrees we need to get the jobs we want, even if we fail to get a good general education. The only thing that endures over time is the law of the farm: I must prepare the ground, put in the seed, cultivate it, weed, water it, then gradually nurture growth and development to full maturity—there is no quick fix, where you can just move in and make everything right with a positive mental attitude and a bunch of success formulas. The law of the harvest governs."

Next month, clarifying your vision for Black male achievement.

Sincerely,

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