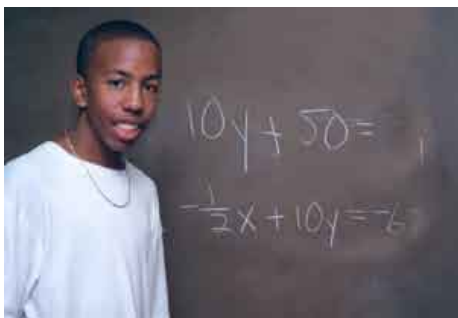


Black Male Achievement

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Climate and Culture

As schools enter into the final months of the school year, each school's success, or failure, in cultivating a school-wide climate and culture of Black male achievement is evidenced through their data (i.e., Black males qualifying for the school's honor roll, participation in student organizations and activities, discipline infractions, and grade distribution). Such data will become predictors of the level of Black male performance on standardized or End-Of-Grade testing.

This month's newsletter is taken from *Chapter 3: Climate and Culture*, in the book, **"Empowering African-American Males: A Guide to Increasing Black Male Achievement."**

As I was preparing this month's newsletter I received the following email from Douglas Elmendorf, principal of Dundalk Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland:

Greetings! I just want to inform you of the tremendous impact your book has had on the climate and culture here at Dundalk Elementary School. In the beginning of the year, we engaged in a book study with our faculty. We used your book, Empowering African American Males. This experience motivated our staff to organize an event we called "Success Day: Celebrating African American Role Models." At this event, 21 African American professionals came to our school, circulated around to different classrooms and spoke about how they have become successful. Each presenter, at this event, was given a copy of the Quick Guide version of your book. Also, our staff shared their successes based on their implementation of the book's principles with administrators from all over the southeast part of Baltimore County.

Thank you for this wonderful publication. Our staff and students have been transformed as a result.

Transforming the climate and culture of any school can occur as a result of the simple efforts (strategy) of committed adults (the village). Teachers, administrators, mentors, and parents are invaluable members of the village, who, through their collaborative efforts, can create positive and nurturing school cultures for all students.



Expecting High Achievement

"Walk into any racially mixed high school cafeteria at lunch time and you will instantly notice that in the sea of adolescent faces, there is an identifiable group of Black students sitting together. Conversely, it could be pointed out that there are many groups of White students sitting together as well, though people rarely comment about that. The question on the tip of everyone's tongue is 'Why are the Black kids sitting together?' Principals want to know, teachers want to know, White students want to know, the Black students who aren't sitting at the table want to know ... Why do Black youths, in particular, think about themselves in terms of race? Because that is how the rest of the world thinks of them."

- Beverly Daniel Tatum

Understanding the unique issues (i.e., media images, peer pressures, societal perceptions, cultural icons) influencing the attitudes and behaviors of Black males is paramount to developing effective communication, intervention, and empowerment strategies. Perhaps there is no group of students who are more misunderstood than Black students.

A sincere desire to understand the issues confronting Black males requires our compassion. However, the sociocultural influences, that continually shape Black male culture, do not necessitate our pity. They need teachers who will teach them, parents who will raise them, and adults throughout the school community who are willing to acknowledge the unique issues confronting them in discussing and developing strategies to empower them.

Teachers and parents have to join forces and agree on expectations. Parents and teachers can only arrive at this point of agreement if they take the time to clarify their missions and visions. Teachers who associate pity with providing an opportunity for a student to turn in a late assignment or retake a test do not understand his needs, the family's needs, or the mission-teaching and learning. Consider, if a 500-word paper is due on Monday, the teacher could require a 700-word paper on Tuesday, a 900-word paper on Wednesday, or a 2000-word paper if turned in anytime prior to the end of the grading period. Failing test grades should be unacceptable. Retests should be mandatory until the desired level of content knowledge is achieved. The consequence of late work or failing

test grades should be more work. Zeros do not inspire young men to do more work nor does an 'F' on a test inspire more study. If they do not care about their grades it does not even punish them-it punishes their parents! In this day of state and federal school accountability mandates, it ultimately punishes the school. If the assignment was meaningful to begin with, then the important concern is stimulating the intrinsic desire to do the work, and providing every opportunity for the student to put forth the effort to acquire the knowledge.

Clarify What Must Be Done To Be Successful

Get a copy of the movie 'Men in Black' and cue the VCR or DVD on the scene where the recruits are being told 'You are the best of the best.' Walk into the classroom dressed in a black suit with dark sunglasses. To be even more dramatic, have some of the football players dress like you and stand around the room with their arms folded. If you are teaching elementary or middle school, borrow some football players from the local high school. Ask for players who have their own black suits and you can provide the sunglasses. After students take their seats, shout "What's my name?" Have the football players respond, "Mr. Wynn." "What's my name?" "Mr. Wynn." "I am an 'A' teacher and I only teach 'A' students. They only allow the best of the best to be in my class, so unless there is an error on your schedule, the fact you're here must mean you are the best of the best, and, I don't mean in the school, I mean in the school district. Since you are the best students, in this class you are expected to get an

'A.' To ensure you get an 'A' I am going to tell you exactly what I am going to do and what is going to be expected from you [begin passing out the course syllabus]. I am not going to trick you. I am going to tell you at least 3 days in advance before I give a test. While I will occasionally give surprise quizzes, they won't count toward your grade, unless you get an 'A.' However, if you don't get an 'A' I will assign more class work and homework to ensure you are learning what you need to know to be an 'A' student. Because I am what? That's right, I'm an 'A' teacher."

Go over the course syllabus and outline in specific detail, exactly what students must do to get an 'A' grade.

"You'll notice on the syllabus, 15 percent of your final grade will be based on homework. The purpose of homework is to reinforce what I am teaching in class and what I will expect you to demonstrate on tests and quizzes. Completing homework is not an option. Late homework is not an option. Sloppily completed homework is not an option. If you turn in homework late, you will be assigned more homework for each day your homework is late. If you turn in incomplete homework, you will be assigned more homework. If you turn in sloppily done homework, you will be assigned more homework. If you turn in any late, incomplete, or sloppily done homework after the first week of school I will ask your parent to come to school to speak to me. If he or she can't make it to school, then I will meet your parent at your home. If I can't meet your parent at your home, then I'll meet him

or her at his or her job. You know your mom, dad, grandmother, or grandfather is not going to want to take time away for their job to meet YOUR teacher because you are turning in sloppy or late homework. Homework is worth 15 percent of your grade and I intend for you to earn every one of those 15 points. If you have a problem with your homework, see me. If you don't understand something, see me. If you need a place to do your homework, my class is open before school in the morning and after school in the evening."

Engage in a similar conversation in regard to every aspect of the syllabus and explain how you are going to meet students' learning-style needs; why lessons are designed in the way in which they are; any supplemental material which may help students to better understand what is being covered; why some students may benefit from making audio tapes of lectures and why other students may benefit from watching video tapes of lectures; and why other students will learn best from the hands-on opportunities.

An 'expectation' of high student performance must be followed by strategy so that it is 'planned' for. Otherwise, high student performance is merely 'hoped' for. Holistically conceived strategies must have, at least, the following three components:

- 1. What I (teacher or parent) will do*
- 2. What I expect you (student or child) to do*
- 3. What I will do if you (student or child) do not do what is expected*

When high achievement is expected between teacher and parent, collaborative strategies will follow. When students realize that low performance will not be tolerated by either teacher or parent, your school will be on the way to cultivating a school-wide culture of high expectations.



Strengthening Relationships

Teachers and parents must be willing to develop strategies that take into account the unique issues and obstacles impacting Black male culture and influencing Black male achievement. Sometimes the attitudes and behaviors young men have internalized is reflected in an unwillingness to try new things, a reluctance to enter into situations where there is a risk of failure, and a general lack of enthusiasm toward school and school work. Oftentimes, Black males need to be pushed and stretched in unfamiliar ways. The difference between their unwillingness and downright rebellion is in the nature of their relationship with teachers, coaches, parents, and mentors. Nurturing learning requires that we strengthen the relationship between the teacher (classroom teacher, parent, mentor, coach, or counselor) and learner (student, player, mentee, or child).

Strong relationships:

- inspire trust;*
- communicate caring and compassion;*
- are based on mutual respect;*
- establish a level of confidence that you (as the adult) can be depended upon; and*
- establish you (as the teacher) as possessing knowledge, wisdom, experience, or some level of disciplinary expertise.*

Each school should consider developing two strategic planning teams, each pursuing a different set of strategic initiatives:

- one team to be comprised of teachers and parents who are highly-developed in Interpersonal Intelligence,*
- the other to be comprised of teachers and parents who are highly-developed in Logical/Mathematical Intelligence.*

The interpersonal team would be people focused, focusing on strategies designed to strengthen relationships (i.e., among staff, between home and school, and between students). The logical/mathematical team would have an instructional focus, focusing on strategies designed to tap into preexisting knowledge, deepen learning, and providing the necessary levels of instructional support. The teams should be comprised of both teachers and parents because of the different

and important perspectives each group brings to the discussions. Student achievement is not a teacher problem or a parent problem, it is a school problem that has far-reaching implications for the school community and the larger society. Strategies must take the unique student and family needs and parent perspectives into account.

- *Demographic needs of students.*
- *Existing school climate and culture and the prevailing attitudes of Black males toward learning.*
- *Data as it relates to student achievement, grade distribution, homework completion, test preparation, and course enrollment.*
- *Classroom management, time-on-task, and transition times during the class period (i.e., teacher-directed, student-directed, wrap-up).*

After gathering and assessing the data reflecting the unique needs of the school community, and after engaging in discussions along the specific lines of building relationships and enhancing classroom and instructional approaches, the two teams should come together to discuss a merging of the strategies. Beginning with one classroom, one subject area, or one grade level the teams should work to develop an action plan with an achievable first goal.

The Hope for Urban Education: A Study of Nine High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Elementary Schools research study noted:

- *School leaders identified and pursued an important, visible, yet attainable, first goal. They focused on the attainment of this first goal, achieved success, and then used their success to move toward more ambitious goals.*
- *School leaders redirected time and energy that was being spent on conflicts between adults in the school toward service to children. Leaders appealed to teachers, support staff, and parents to put aside their own interests and focus on serving children well.*
- *Educators fostered in students a sense of responsibility for appropriate behavior and they created an environment in which students were likely to behave well. Discipline problems became rare as the schools implemented multi-faceted approaches for helping students learn responsibility for their own behavior.*

Pursuing an achievable first goal of building stronger relationships between school-based personnel and Black males and their families should drive end-of-year strategic planning discussions. Coaches, booster clubs, and school opening/orientation meetings should be used to build such relationships and to initiate and sustain the types of relationships that will inspire higher levels of Black male achievement and parental involvement.

Distinguishing Between Cultural Norms and Cultural Influences



While teachers and parents oftentimes agree on the cultural influences, i.e., music, language, style of dress, peer pressures, and lack of positive mentoring, there is general disagreement as to the cultural beliefs and values that the influences reflect. Teachers believe the behaviors exhibited by Black males within their classrooms is reflective of the acceptable norms of their household culture and the devaluing of education, commonplace amongst Black males, is a reflection of 'Black culture.' Parents, on the other hand, vehemently disagree with the behavior of Black males as being reflective of Black culture or family culture. Rather than taking negative attitudes and behaviors to school, parents believe their sons bring negative attitudes and behaviors home from school.

Having grown up a Black male and, now a parent of two Black males, I have reflected on how I behaved in school through the sixties and seventies, and on the behaviors, which my boys have exhibited in school through the nineties and into the new

millennium. Neither my behaviors of four decades ago, nor my sons' behaviors yesterday, reflect 'Black culture.' Their classroom behaviors, as was the case when I was in school, is reflective of a combination of peer pressures, pop cultural influences, their own personality types, and the expectations communicated by the adult who is present (i.e., what they can get away with). The influence of parental behavioral expectations depends largely on the level of communication between home and school and the strength of the relationship between parent and teacher.

Elizabeth Hood, in *Educating Black Students: Some Basic Issues*, describes the experiences of a Black administrator with three seventh-grade Black males expelled from a classroom:

I said to these three small but energetic boys, 'This is the third time in a week that you three have been sent to the office from Miss J's class. What is the problem with you in Miss J's class?'

One of the boys responded, 'Miss J just picks on us. The whole class makes noise in that lady's room. She doesn't know how to make us behave. All the kids act up in that room. She doesn't like us three, so she sends us to the office to try to scare the other kids.'

'You do get along well in your other classes?' I asked. 'Well, Ma'am, it's like this,' the smaller of the three joined in, 'We do all right when the teachers really get us when we get out our seats and make noise. We don't do nothing wrong in those classes. No Ma'am.'

The outcome of the battle was always decided on the first day the students entered the class. If the teacher failed to 'make them' at that initial encounter, the battle was over and the teacher the loser.

Rather than assuming that the behaviors expected by Black males in school is reflected of behaviors allowed by coaches and parents outside of school, teachers must shed biases and discard stereotypes. When Black males walk into classrooms or onto athletic fields they must be assessed individually rather than as representative of some larger identifiable 'Black culture.'

- *get to know them (i.e., personality type, learning-styles, intelligences, strengths and weaknesses);*
- *visit their homes and get to know the hopes and dreams of their families;*
- *get to know the make-up of their family unit (i.e., single parent, grand parents, only child, siblings, foster care, multiple generations within the household);*
- *get to know their peer group, peer culture, and peer values;*
- *get to know their heroes, heroines, and role models (i.e., parent, older sibling, teacher, coach, entertainer, athlete);*
- *understand their reputation without being unduly influenced by it (i.e., frequent office referrals or suspensions, loud talking teachers, confrontational attitudes);*

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- *understand their level of preexisting knowledge (i.e., experiences outside of their community, cultural exposure);*
 - *understand their socioeconomic frame of reference (i.e., living in poverty, homeless, middle class, affluent);*
 - *understand their family exposure to postsecondary education and careers (i.e., the educational background and type of work their parents do);*
 - *understand their experiences with adults within the school setting and whether or not there are any influential adults who can be collaborated with for support (i.e., teachers, administrators, custodians, school bus drivers, coaches).*

Getting to know the Black males within a school community requires a willingness to understand what has shaped their attitudes and behaviors and to accept that the influences are oftentimes contrary to the values, beliefs, and cultural frame of reference of their homes.

Beverly Daniel Tatum, in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* notes:

In The Autobiography of Malcolm X, as a junior high school student, Malcolm was a star. Despite the fact that he was separated from his family and living in a foster home, he was an 'A' student and was elected president of his class. One day he had a conversation with

his English teacher, whom he liked and respected, about his future career goals. Malcolm said that he wanted to be a lawyer. His teacher responded, 'That's no realistic goal for a nigger,' and advised him to consider carpentry instead. The message was clear: You are a Black male, your racial group membership matters, plan accordingly. Malcolm's emotional response was typical—anger, confusion, and alienation. He withdrew from his White classmates, stopped participating in class, and eventually left his predominately White Michigan home to live with his sister in Roxbury, a Black community in Boston.

Clearly, Malcolm's attitude toward school, teachers, and White classmates was not shaped by home, family, or community culture, but by the school itself through the attitude, language, and behavior of one teacher. A teacher with a clear mission to discourage Black students from pursuing those intellectual and vocational pursuits considered reserved for Whites. While not necessarily rooted in racism, the attitude that Black students should not be encouraged toward certain intellectual and vocational pursuits exists through academic tracking and grouping, vocational or career tracks, recommendations for special education placement, questioning the recommendations and referrals for gifted education placement, denial of Black student enrollment in honors and AP classes, and a failure by teachers, counselors, and coaches to encourage Black students to aspire toward college. The attitudes and behaviors of adults within school communities are

powerful contributing factors to the attitudes and behaviors of Black males.

There is an undeniable cultural disconnect between Black males and teachers, counselors, and coaches within school communities across the country. Public school teachers, teaching in urban and inner-city communities, are unlikely to live within the communities where they teach. They do not attend church with, see students and families at the local grocery store, or interact with students and families away from the formality of the school setting. This unfamiliarity with students and families is exacerbated in schools as a result of the socioeconomic, gender, and cultural gaps existing between classroom teachers and Black male students. Teachers must recognize the existence of these respective gaps and be proactive in developing a holistic set of strategies reinforcing consistent expectations between home and school.

To develop an effective home-school collaboration you must begin by:

- 1. Understanding Black male culture and thereby anticipating certain behaviors.*
- 2. Identifying any potential cultural, socioeconomic, or gender gaps.*
- 3. Creating a holistic set of strategies, which reinforce expectations between school and home.*

Meaningful and sustainable parent involvement strategies are critical to increasing and sustaining Black male achievement. Begin by engaging in an open and candid discussion as to the level of parental involvement that your school has cultivated, sustains, and assesses. Are Black parents part of the school improvement planning team, School Advisory Council, Local School Council, or your Black Male Achievement Task Force?

Do Black parents provide input into grading methodology, how grading rubrics are designed, or in developing the most effective form of home-school communication?

Do the parents of Black males have a voice in the strategic actions that are being directed at increasing Black male achievement levels?

More than any other cultural variable, school culture represents the most powerful influence on the academic achievement of Black males. This is not to suggest that parents are absolved of their responsibility in nurturing the academic achievement of their sons, however, unless they choose to home school, their children spend more of their waking hours around adults within the school community—school bus drivers, support staff, classroom teachers, and coaches—than they do with parents during the school year. The academic foundation, values, and critical-thinking skills taught at home are either nurtured, expanded upon, or undermined during their son's many hours in

school and their involvement in school-related activities.

As a result of the powerful cultural influence of schools, parents must learn how to identify, understand, and intervene when school culture is not nurturing of Black male academic achievement, social development, or college enrollment. Jawanza Kunjufu has coined the phrase, “*The Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*” in his series of books on the topic. Despite state accountability standards, Black male achievement task forces, and school improvement plans, many school communities cultivate the existence of such a conspiracy through their failure to recognize and respond to the cultural influences occurring within the school which are having a negative impact on Black male achievement. The reality of school culture is that it is either defined by adults, or by default, is defined by children. Either adults set the standards, define the boundaries, establish the values, create the appropriate customs and rituals, or by default, they are established by children.

Next month, ensuring that Black males gain full access to curriculum and content.

Sincerely,

Mychal Wynn

Rising Sun Publishing

