

Schools look to help young black male students

Academic interventions, adult mentoring are used to reverse dismal statistics

Del Stover

Too many black male students are in academic trouble. Too many are held back a grade. Too many fail to enroll in rigorous coursework. Too many drop out. And too many graduate ill-prepared for college.

None of this is news to urban school leaders. Most have seen their school system's disaggregated data on student achievement. Many have heard talk of the "school-to-prison pipeline" or the warning that young black men are an "endangered species."

But what should give school board members pause is another reality about this vulnerable student population: All signs suggest that academic success depends greatly on the schools these students attend.

According to *Given Half a Chance: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education for Black Males*, South Dakota graduated 89 percent of its black male students, yet in Michigan, "barely a third of its black male students" graduate on time with their peers. Similar disparities exist at the district level. In the 2005-06 school year, the report says, Fort Bend, Texas, graduat-



The academic success of young black male students, like these at Fort Caroline Elementary School in Duval County, Fla., depends greatly on where they attend school—a fact that urban school leaders should note.

ed 82 percent of its black male students on time with their peers. The same students in Indianapolis had a four-year graduation rate of only 19 percent.

Such differences make clear that "the quality of [academic] opportunities available, not differences in students' ability" determine the fate of young black males in school, the report concludes.

That finding should give urban school leaders a clear sense of their mission, says John Jackson, president and CEO of the Schott Foundation for Public Education,

which focuses on issues surrounding black student achievement.

"If we truly want to address the achievement gap and move this country forward, we have to address this opportunity gap" confronting black male students, he says. "When you look at the data, in 46 of 50 states, black males are at the bottom of so many indicators."

So many factors determine the poor academic performance of young black

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About CUBE

NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), the urban initiative of NSBA's National Affiliate program, addresses the programmatic, fiscal, and governance challenges of urban public education on behalf of its 113 member school boards and the more than 8 million students they serve. Through legislative advocacy, conferences, workshops, seminars, and publications, CUBE has been in the forefront of cultivating excellence in urban public schools for four decades.

About NSBA

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of Hawaii and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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CUBE News

CUBE's role in NSBA governance ensures urban perspective heard

People sometimes ask how CUBE participates in NSBA's overall governance—and what impact CUBE has on the organization as a whole. As it happens, we are approaching the time of year when that impact is evident in several ways.

CUBE districts elect their Steering Committee members at the CUBE Annual Business Meeting, and then the Steering Committee votes on a chair

and vice-chair to lead the organization for the upcoming year. Under NSBA's bylaws, the chair of CUBE also serves as a member of the NSBA Board of Directors, ensuring an urban voice in NSBA decision making.

CUBE also participates in creating policy for NSBA by submitting recommendations to NSBA's Delegate Assembly on issues challenging urban districts, so NSBA can put in place action plans for the coming year. The chair of CUBE also serves on the NSBA Policies and Resolutions Committee.

CUBE districts often are the largest districts in their respective states, and in many cases among the largest school districts in the nation. It is often said that CUBE districts are a testing ground or litmus test for issues that will face the rest of the nation in years to come. So it is important for CUBE's recommendations to be timely, accurate, and groundbreaking.

A subcommittee of the CUBE Steering Committee evaluates educational trends, discusses what challenges CUBE districts are facing in the future, and then drafts recommendations to be submitted to NSBA's Delegate

Assembly. From there, the delegates hear from different areas within NSBA and incorporate or edit the recommendations.

It is very important for CUBE districts to contact their NSBA delegates and ask them to support the beliefs and policies proposed by CUBE. In order to do that, you'll need to check with your state school boards association prior to NSBA's Annual Conference to find out

who your state delegates are. Sometimes they are fellow local school board members, or they could be anyone from around your state.

If you have any questions about this process or how to get in touch with your state school boards association, please contact Kevin Scott, CUBE Member Services Manager, kscott@nsba.org.

CUBE's annual business meeting will take place on Saturday, April 10, as a breakfast meeting in the McCormick Place Convention Center, during the 70th Annual NSBA Conference and Exposition.

CUBE is proposing one belief and one resolution in 2010:

RESOLUTION: NSBA urges the federal government to adopt new policies and guidelines to improve communications with states and

schools to ensure that tainted food products are quickly removed from school cafeterias and eliminated from delivery systems.

Article IV—The Educational Program Section 4—Special Programs 4.7—International Language Instruction

POLICY: NSBA encourages school policies and programs that promote K-12 opportunities for international language study to prepare children for the demands of their future, including learning about other races and ethnic groups so that they can be prepared to participate in a global society.

Alternative schools are no longer dumping grounds for kids

Alternative schools historically have been the dumping ground of school districts, a run-down building on the edge of town, where the most challenging and troubled students are sent—along with teachers who are the least experienced and prepared to deal with them.

Unfortunately, time in these schools was usually a prelude to dropping out, placing students on a path of missed opportunities that statistics have chronicled all too well.

That's not, of course, how school board members like to think about their alternative schools. And, in fact, it isn't always the case. Increasingly, these so-called "schools of last resort" are fulfilling their promise, providing students with the support and structure they need to succeed.

"We're taking the kids our school system can't handle," Garry Grady, an administrator of the John Muir Charter School in San Francisco recently told the *San Francisco Examiner*.

Opened in 2005, Grady's school attracts students with rap sheets, bad attitudes, and a myopic view of the future with bus passes, health care, and cold, hard cash. Students get paid \$10 a day for coming to class and \$7 an hour when they participate in a job skills training program. All of this is made possible through a series of partnerships with state and local agencies, federal funds, and donations.

The academic and vocational tracks allow students to pursue college or a skilled trade upon graduation. So far, 200 of the school's 500 current or former students have earned a diploma.

Certainly, charter schools, with their greater flexibility and latitude, have made inroads with students who have been cast out of traditional public schools. But that hard work also has been done within the parameters of district-run schools, often using some of the same strategies including small class sizes, differentiated instruction, and character education.

REBOUND, for instance, is a collaborative effort of the Aurora Public Schools, Community College of Aurora, and Colorado Youth for Change to get dropouts or expelled students back on

track and in school.

Launched in 2008, the program moved 95 percent of its students in the 2008-2009 school year on to the next grade level or through to graduation—thanks to an individualized learning program that combines behavioral and social skills training, life skills management, and the opportunity to take courses at the community college.

Because each alternative program is as unique as the student body and community it serves, it is difficult to make a wholesale judgment on its effectiveness, school officials say. But there



A student at Detroit Cares Academy works on a hairstyle under the guidance of a cosmetology teacher. Until last year, the school was Detroit's "Last Chance Academy" for students failing in traditional school settings. The school offers cosmetology, building trades, culinary arts, and hospitality training.

seems to be consensus that successful programs keep classes small, tailor instruction to student needs and learning style, and allow for flexible schedules.

Teachers unions protest RTTP provisions

Several states and districts seeking federal Race to the Top grants this year butted heads with their local teachers unions, which protested some of the provisions included in grant applications.

As Ohio—a state beleaguered by a long-term recession and budget shortfalls—sought to apply for Race to the Top grants, the Cincinnati teachers union cried foul.

If the state moved forward with its plan, it would be violating the collective bargaining laws, union officials said, because the Cincinnati board would be forced to act on provisions that had not been discussed or contrasted with existing labor contracts. Cleveland's union expressed similar concerns.

The unions' stands on issues including tenure, pay for performance, and charter schools—three hot-button items the

Obama administration wants to see addressed in the applications—could hinder districts and states from receiving the much-needed funds. Several state-level union affiliates urged their local chapters to boycott or protest the application process because of those issues.

Despite strong union opposition, the Los Angeles Unified School District was one of many districts in the state that passed a measure to abide by changes pushed by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to allow parents in low-performing schools to have more say in reforms and allow districts to take action on those schools.

"Clearly we need the money, but more than that our kids need a better school district and a better education," Los Angeles school board member Yolie Flores Aguilar told the *Los Angeles Times*.

Focus on dropout rate likely to increase with federal funds

When then-Superintendent Arne Duncan and his underlings at Chicago Public Schools began designing a plan to send more students to college, they quickly realized the first issue they needed to address was the district's dropout rate.

"It's a dual conversation on dropouts and college enrollment," says Greg Darnieder, a special assistant to Duncan who oversaw a project to follow Chicago students through their secondary careers. "To improve the dropout rate, we had to understand the dynamics of why students were dropping out."

What data in Chicago showed was that about a third of the students entering high school were over-age, having already been retained for at least one grade, Darnieder says. Research shows that a student's experience in the first few weeks after entering high school was a key indicator to whether they would graduate.

With that in mind, Chicago's team created programs to help students succeed, and Duncan, now U.S. Secretary of Education, is challenging states and districts to propose similar projects to receive federal stimulus grants.

The timing is good. Most urban school systems already are pursuing strategies to keep students in school. Not only do urban school leaders recognize the personal and economic costs to both students and society from a high dropout rate, but also many are recognizing that fewer dropouts lead to more money for districts.



Students pose for photos before the start of the Life Skills Center graduation ceremony in Columbus, Ohio. The charter school serves high school dropouts and students at risk of dropping out.

How much money? An analysis by the Alliance for Excellent Education, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group, found that in the nation's 50 largest cities, nearly 600,000 students dropped out of the high school class of 2008. The group estimated that if half of those students had graduated, they would have earned, on average, more than \$4.1 billion in additional income every year, and state and local tax revenues in those areas would have jumped more than \$500 million.

In Chicago, school officials tackled their dropout problem by creating a freshman connection program for the summers between the eighth and ninth grades, when students spent time in their new schools meeting teachers, learning

about sports and extracurricular activities, and being mentored by older students.

The district created a website, chooseyourfuture.org, to help students plan for college or the workplace.

As a result, school officials say the dropout rate has been declining, from 46.9 percent in 2004 to 42.5 percent in 2008.

Some critics of Duncan have questioned whether the city's statistics in curbing the dropout rate are exaggerated and note that the dropout rate still remains at about 50 percent for the district's non-specialized high schools. But Chicago officials are confident that they've made a dent in the problem.

Now the Obama administration is sweetening the incentive for other school systems to lower their dropout rates through the Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation (3i) funds.

"Through Race to the Top, states with the greatest commitment to reform will win grants that implement reforms that will raise graduation rates, prepare students for success in college and the workplace, and improve other outcomes for children," says Justin Hamilton, a spokesman for the Education Department. "Through the Investing in Innovation program, we will reward districts that are preparing to start or scale up reform programs that address many of the critical needs facing schools today—including dropout prevention programs."

Minneapolis hopes downsizing can strengthen schools

Downsizing an urban school district can be a harrowing task; just ask school officials in Detroit, St. Louis, Washington, D.C., and other cities where falling enrollments and rising costs have required painful cuts and school closures.

Public schools in Minneapolis are facing similar pressures, but the district hopes that a comprehensive downsizing and restructuring plan will make the schools stronger.

Last year, the district closed five schools in northwest Minneapolis, says Jackie Turner, a spokeswoman for the Minneapolis Public Schools.

"But we did this as a means to strengthen the remaining schools," she told *Urban Advocate*. Improvements to the remaining elementary schools has

included increased funding, preschool classes, and all-day kindergarten.

In September, the school board approved a plan to divide the district into three attendance zones, a move that will cut transportation costs and include four more school closures. This change is expected to save \$6.5 million next year, although the district still needs to close a projected \$12.5 million budget deficit.

A small victory was achieved this fall when the district, which had been losing about 1,000 students each year, saw enrollment decline by just 700, Turner says. Enrollment is expected to drop for the next two to three years, but then start increasing again because of rising birth rates, Minnesota State Demographer Tom Gillaspay told the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.

Some observers have expressed concern that reduced busing, combined with the new attendance zones, will reduce racial and economic diversity in schools.

It "will result in deeply isolated schools," Myron Orfield, director of the University of Minnesota's Institute on Race & Poverty, told the *Star Tribune* in January. "It will get worse."

Turner acknowledges that many parts of Minneapolis are highly segregated, but she says the district is trying to diversify the schools through magnet programs that have clear student diversity targets. Also, the district recognized that the southwest section of the city is largely white and middle class, so it made sure to include a nearby low-income minority neighborhood in the same attendance zone.

Schools dealing with student protests

The dismissal of nearly 400 school district employees by District of Columbia Chancellor Michelle Rhee last fall touched off a firestorm of controversy among elected and union officials.

But it also drew student protests, with 200 student from the McKinley Technology High School marching off their campus toward the district's headquarters where they staged a sit-down demonstration, chanting "No teachers, no peace" along the way.

It certainly wasn't the first time in recent history that students in the country's most politically charged town exercised their freedom of speech—in early 2008, about 70 students, after rallying with parents and teachers over the closure of 23 schools, marched to Rhee's office and demanded a meeting.

Months later, nearly 100 students from Woodrow Wilson Senior High School walked out of class and onto the school's football field to protest a new security policy that nixed their free lunch period.

"A big part of what we're opposing is not the measure but how they're doing it," Lena Solow, a senior at the time, told the *Washington Post*. "They're not consulting parents, students, or teachers."

Student protests certainly are not contained to the nation's capital. In November, more than 1,500 high school students from Georgia's Clayton County Public Schools arrived at school in "non-appropriate dress." The district had instituted a dress policy the prior year that banned T-shirts, flip-flops, and jeans. It was later learned that the students organized online, with some 800 joining a Facebook group called "Clayton County high school students against required uniforms."

Student protests—especially when they occur during school hours or on the school campus and are intentionally disruptive—force school officials to react quickly to minimize the ill effects of such a commotion. Yet officials also must address the underlying cause of the disturbance.

No one knows that better than officials in California's San Diego County Office of Education, who have confronted several demonstrations organized by the Latino population to lobby for immigration reform. In 2006, thousands of students walked out of class as part of this effort, which led to insights on proactive and preventive measures that

school officials have made available online. Among them:

- Before or shortly after a potentially controversy erupts, school officials should research the underlying issue and develop talking points to help others understand the issue.
- Schools are encouraged to foster an atmosphere of respect by providing an outlet for students to express their concerns, bringing in guest speakers that can provide advice on how to protest peacefully and constructively, and identifying vocal students and teachers who have a rapport with protestors to create an

environment where people feel heard.

- If a walkout or other disruption is imminent, school officials have several choices. They can encourage students to wait until after school hours to protest, provide a safe route that is developed in concert with the school's safety team and local police, or place the school on lockdown.
- Safety is paramount. Law enforcement should be involved as much as possible, and students should be apprised that acts of violence or disrespect will not be tolerated and will have negative consequences.

Heart screenings for sixth-graders

We've all read stories about young athletes who have dropped dead on the football field or basketball court because of an undiagnosed heart condition. The implication is that, while these students' deaths are indeed tragic, their conditions are extremely rare.

Now Dr. John Higgins, a Houston cardiologist, is suggesting that such potentially life-threatening heart defects are not nearly as rare as we think, and he is urging the Texas state legislature to mandate heart screenings for students entering sixth grade.

In an initial screening of about 100 students at a Houston middle school, Higgins' team found seven had undiagnosed heart conditions, two of which were serious enough to require surgery. The screening, part of a foundation-sponsored program called HEARTS—Houston Early Age Risk Testing and Screening—also turned up three children with Stage II hypertension, Higgins says.

But the most disturbing finding was that 2 percent the early adolescents had potentially life-threatening conditions.

"It's shocking. We're really concerned," Higgins told *Urban Advocate*. "That speaks to the fact that we have to do something about this."

Why such a high percentage?

"If you look at the literature, it's 0.8 to 1 percent" of students with serious heart defects, says Higgins, a sports cardiologist at the University of Texas Medical School at Houston and the Memorial Hermann Medical Sports

Institute. However, he says, "99.9 percent of those [tested] are athletes."

Higgins and his team believe that the incidence of serious heart disease is greater in the general population of students. For example, some young people never try out for a sports team because of shortness of breath or other health problems that could turn out to be heart-related. The results at the first school tested, Key Middle School, suggest they may be right.

"That's our hypothesis," Higgins says.

Most of the students at Key were black or Hispanic, and about 75 percent were overweight or obese, Higgins says. He said excess weight could be implicated in the hypertension findings but not the heart defects.

Typically, U.S. public schools require students who want to play on sports teams to provide medical histories and results of a physical check-up. Sometimes, Higgins says, schools just ask for the medical history.

Higgins' screening team adds two other tests: an electrocardiogram (EKG) and an ultrasound scan of the heart. These procedures take about 15 minutes and cost just \$150—a bargain, Higgins says, considering that tests such as MRIs can easily run between \$1,000 and \$2,000.

In 2006, four Houston area athletes between the ages of 12 to 19 died in less than a month during or after drills, according to the *Houston Chronicle*. Higgins says his group chose to give the heart screenings in middle school, before students enroll in high school sports.

STUDENTS

Continued from page 1

males, and it's important to acknowledge those outside the control of school boards. High concentrations of poverty, particularly intergenerational poverty, create huge educational challenges for schools to overcome, yet such poverty also severely curtails the resources communities can focus on their schools.

Meanwhile students in these poorer communities also are distracted from their studies by dysfunctional family situations, gang activity, high crime rates, or the need to help support their economically struggling families.

How to offset these harsh realities is a question that's being asked repeatedly these days. In Jacksonville, Fla., corporate, elected, and school leaders hosted a symposium last year specifically to talk about efforts to help young black men in

the community. In Georgia, the 100 Black Men of Atlanta has joined forces with school officials to provide mentoring to the city's young male students.

This spring, urban school leaders will discuss the topic in a CUBE Issues Forum on Saturday, April 10, at 2 p.m. during NSBA's 70th Annual Conference and Exposition in Chicago.

High stakes

Fueling this debate is not just the human cost to young students, whose academic failures diminish their economic opportunities and put them at greater risk of poor health, imprisonment, and victimization by other societal ills. The communities where these young men live also pay the price.

Such communities "cannot thrive without having this population being successful," Jackson insists. "Success is not just graduating, but success is about

being fathers, being husbands, being gainfully employed. And if we don't fix what's happening in urban centers, it could impact any student, anywhere."

Fortunately, many educators say school boards and superintendents can take steps to improve the success of these at-risk students. And the place to start is by focusing on equity—in the quality of teachers, instructional materials, facilities, expectations, and opportunities—available to young black males.

Given today's economic slowdown, coupled with institutional disparities in school funding across the nation, equity isn't so easy to provide. But one inexpensive start is to ensure that academic expectations are equal for all students. Studies show that about 60 percent of black male students never take high-level math courses, and these students often are disproportionately shut out of college-prep magnet programs.

Such findings highlight the inequities that exist—inequities that are partly due to low expectations for young black males. But school boards can change expectations. In Virginia Beach, Va., for example, the school board has made clear to administrators that they're watching some measurements—such as test scores and dropout rates—and holding principals and central office administrators accountable.

Participation in more rigorous classes also is being scrutinized to identify where teachers and principals are too comfortable with the status quo.

The quality of teachers also is under scrutiny across the nation. In schools with high numbers of academically struggling black male students, teachers are more likely to be new to the profession and less qualified in the subjects they're teaching. Most urban school districts are working to change that—or at least provide more training to offset this reality.

In looking at teachers, some say urban schools also lack enough male role models—particularly black male role models—for young boys. Bryan Nelson, founder of the Minneapolis-based nonprofit MenTeach, says urban schools aren't trying hard enough to attract black male teachers.

Some school leaders would contest that judgment, but Nelson points out that some urban schools still wait until the summer to hire new teachers—when highly sought-after black male teachers already have a job. Certain stereotypes also hinder the hiring of these desirable teachers. For example, Nelson recalls a study in which administrators, after being

STRATEGIES SHIFT AS NEEDS DEMAND IN TOLEDO

With no simple answers—and limited funding—the Toledo Public Schools are doing what they can to offer a helping hand to young black male students.

In one high-poverty neighborhood, the school system has converted an elementary school into the Lincoln Academy of Boys. The school features a lower-than-average class size and a cadre of tutors and mentors recruited from local community groups.

At the middle and high schools, educators have brought in the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) program—a group dedicated to addressing the academic and social challenges of black males—to teach young black males leadership skills and encourage academic success and discourage dropouts.

"It's a way to keep students engaged and in school, and it's been a real successful program," says Jan Kilbride, the district's chief academic officer.

Community partnerships have been an essential component of the school system's efforts to help young black men, as school funding has been cut and grant money has dried up.

One victim of today's budget realities was state funding targeted specifically to help minority males succeed in high school, Kilbride says. Also lost

were school-based "linkage coordinators" provided by local government agencies who arranged tutoring, college tours, and access to community services.

With money tight, some of the most effective ways to help young black male students have been to focus on instructional strategies that work with any academically troubled student, Kilbride says.

"It's a very fine balance between providing good instruction for all students, but then looking at specific students whose needs are greater," she says. "This past year, with stimulus money, we focused on providing interventions and assessments to teachers in all of our elementary schools. So, looking at it from that point of view, we looked at who was struggling, not what subgroup they came from."

Still, where young black males are struggling, such interventions mean they are getting needed attention, Kilbride says. For example, they're benefitting from the school system's emphasis on dividing troubled high schools into smaller learning communities, where adults have the opportunity to get to know students better.

"Those schools are showing increased graduation rates," she notes. "It's another example where we're not specifically targeting one ethnic group or gender, but it's had success."



Making certain that students master reading skills in the elementary grades are key for academic success in the teenage years, say officials in the Duval County (Fla.) Public Schools.

DUVAL COUNTY, FLA., FOCUSES ON TRAINING, EARLY LITERACY, AND RELEVANT READING MATERIAL

Good reading skills are the foundation of academic success, and young black male students are more likely to gain such skills if what they're reading has any relevancy to their lives.

That's the thinking in Jacksonville, Fla. "If the material you're showing [students] has no relative connection to what's happening in their personal life, there's no engagement there," says Jacqueline Bowen, supervisor of reading and language arts for the Duval County Public Schools. "We're looking for reading material that connects with what's happening to students" in their urban neighborhoods and families.

If successful, Duval County will be doing better than many school systems. Over the years, Alfred Tatum, an associate professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago and author of *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap*, has complained about the reading material that schools expect young black males to read.

"There should be no way students can go through the U.S. school system and not find texts they find significant to their lives," he once told a reporter.

Relevancy is, of course, only one facet of any successful strategy to teach literacy, and the work of

Tatum and other educators has encouraged Duval County officials to expand teacher training in literacy, as well as in improving communications and understanding between teachers and students from different backgrounds.

"We've put diversity facilitators in every school," says Bowen, who has observed the need for such training herself. She recalls watching a teacher express concern about a child's state of dress, without taking the time to understand the student's background or circumstance.

"So you've engaged the child in a disciplinary issue and then want them to care about a lesson?" she asks. "Teachers need more professional direction to make connections with students."

Despite such interventions, Bowen says, perhaps the most powerful initiative on behalf of young black male students doesn't target race or gender, Bowen says. What's going to make a difference is the school system's expansion of pre-school opportunities and its emphasis on early literacy.

"If you look deeper, that's where the problem [of young black males] lies," says Bowen, arguing school officials cannot wait until academic problems arise to deal with literacy issues. "If a child is unsuccessful in reading, it inhibits learning anywhere else."

given a list of potential job applicants, were half again as likely to hire a woman over a man with similar qualifications. "It's a bias that happens."

Pop psychology?

One subject of debate among educators is how much weight to give to arguments that urban black male students have unique needs and learning styles that should be addressed. In research on racial identity, psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum has written that black teens define themselves by what they see on video and television. Many black youth also are victim to cultural stereotypes that academics are for white students, and those youth sometimes are ridiculed by other blacks for making academic efforts.

Questions also have been raised about how well teachers understand young black men, particularly in schools where the majority of teachers are women, many from middle-class backgrounds with no experience in inner-city life. Student misbehavior and a disengagement from learning can stem from teachers simply not understanding how to relate to these students.

Some argue this impact isn't that relevant, that good instruction is a far greater concern for school boards. But others suggest that there are times when educators need to look at black male students in a different light.

At Atlanta's B.E.S.T Academy, an all-boys school serving a high-poverty area, Principal LaPaul Shelton says instructional and support strategies depend on the community served. Addressing the cultural surroundings of students is more important where stable families, good role models, and community support is lacking.

It's undeniable that some black male students will benefit from additional support, which is why Shelton's school relies on mentoring provided by members of the 100 Black Men of Atlanta. And it's why some Toledo, Ohio, schools have turned to the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB), established to address the academic and social challenges of African American males, for adult-student support.

"You just need such mentoring sometimes," Shelton says.

It also is helpful to share with teachers research findings on how the brain works—and gender differences in learning, says Tamara Cotman, a senior administrator overseeing 21 school campuses in Atlanta. "Boys are wired differ-

ently in terms of what they value and appreciate. Boys like competition. They enjoy games. Researchers have graphs that show a change in brain activity if a young man is sitting too long. There are things that work for boys that help them learn best.”

Basic teaching

Every school system—indeed, every school—puts a slightly different emphasis on addressing the needs of young black male students. Some, like Virginia Beach, have launched initiatives directly aimed at these students’ needs. Others simply are conscious of the instructional challenges that exist and do their best to meet them, just as they do with any other student subgroup.

It’s not so much the specific strategy that matters as the conscious effort to meet the needs of these students, Jackson says.

“School board members play a very essential role in raising questions. It’s not just about looking at the achievement gap data, but strategically focusing on what’s their plan for closing this opportunity gap. We have schools where students aren’t given access to highly effective teachers. If you plan to close that gap, then, where are the resources that are needed as a school or district to accomplish it? How do you align community resources to create a cradle-to-career pipeline?”

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NEEDS OF BLACK MALES RANK HIGH IN VIRGINIA BEACH

Most school systems cite closing the achievement gap among their strategic goals. The Virginia Beach City Public Schools are more specific: It puts a “particular focus” on boosting the academic success of black male students.

That means school administrators and teachers are on notice to boost reading and math scores, the passage rate on state exams, attendance and graduation rates, and participation in advanced classes.

“I think the biggest part [of adding this goal] is to raise the level of urgency at the school level,” says Esther Monclova-Johnson, the district’s director of equity affairs. “We have very specific benchmarks that are being looked at throughout the year.”

To meet those benchmarks, educators have had to re-examine their professional development focus, look for best practices targeting young black male students, and seek out new classroom lessons and instructional strategies, she adds.

Such efforts parallel a growing “conversation about race” among city educators and its impact on instruction, Monclova-Johnson says. How do teachers interact with their young black male students? Do they have lower expectations of them? How well do they comprehend the challenges facing their students?

Much of this discussion arose from a grassroots effort by some teachers

and administrators who were frustrated at what was happening in their classrooms, Monclova-Johnson says. That frustration has led to the formation of a districtwide committee and ongoing meetings on diversity and instruction.

One of the beneficial results of this discussion has been a push to expand black male participation in advanced coursework, she says. Another was development of a training video that shows young men talking about their experiences in the classroom and with teachers.

“It’s a vital training tool,” Monclova-Johnson says. “When people start talking about the impact of race and student achievement and expectations, it is something that causes people to perk up ... it starts a discussion about what impact does my teaching have, how do I relate to the child?”

Since 2007, school officials have been looking nationwide at instructional strategies targeting black male students, she says. There is great interest among teachers in a “cook-book” of strategies that they can tap to help them with their classroom work. Some of that material has been made available to teachers online.

“The goal is that, if teachers are looking for a specific area of concern, they can dig in and really get a lot of information about what needs to happen in their classroom,” Monclova-Johnson says.

ALL-BOYS ACADEMY IN ATLANTA OFFERS HOPE WHERE OLD SCHOOL FAILED

An all-boys academy is controversial—and certainly no panacea—but it seemed a worthwhile experiment to officials in the Atlanta Public Schools.

Thus was born B.E.S.T Academy, which serves sixth- through eighth-graders in one of the more troubled neighborhoods of the city and will add high school grades in the future.

The academy was a last-ditch effort to respond to a traditional middle school that had been consistently failing despite numerous reform efforts, says Susan Dyer, special assistant to the deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

B.E.S.T Academy incorporates many of instructional principles directed at young boys, says Principal LaPaul Shelton. “They have

to be given opportunities to move around the room. More so with young boys, students can’t just sit there for long periods.”

What’s more, he says, “we have teachers who are trained and can focus primarily on the adolescent male student.” Most teachers are men, and weekly training focuses on the best practices of single gender instruction.

Such an approach can’t be replicated everywhere—nor does it need to be, says Tamara Cotman, a senior administrator responsible for the academy and 20 other campuses. But an all-boys school is an approach that’s worthy of consideration in the right circumstances.

“We’re in our third year of imple-

mentation, and it’s been amazing to watch as [the school staff is] trained in best practices and we see gains,” she says.

Some educators say too much is made of gender-specific instruction, but Shelton notes that, in some instances, young men need extra attention.

A lot also depends on community priorities, officials say. In the case of B.E.S.T Academy, dramatic action was accepted because the previous school had failed consistently, and the surrounding neighborhoods suffered from drug trafficking, gang activity, and other social ills that often undermined much of the good work accomplished by schools during the day.

Research & Reality

PBS Kids' programming helps preschoolers learn literacy skills

Yet watching TV isn't enough, as student gains still depend on teachers

Most educators would agree that "Sesame Street" is a positive example of a television show aimed at preschoolers. But while Big Bird might help youngsters learn a few letters of the alphabet, few would suggest that the award-winning show—or any television show—can truly help preschoolers learn to read.

That is, until now. A study funded by the Corporation of Public Broadcasting concludes that low-income children can learn important core literacy skills from the PBS series "Super Why!" Another study cites beneficial results from watching the same show, as well as "Sesame Street" and "Between the Lions," all produced for PBS as part of its Ready to Learn Initiative.

The findings might not be surprising given the network's sponsorship of the studies. But researchers aren't suggesting preschool teachers can simply plop kids in front of the TV and expect PBS to do all the work. If anything, the study concludes that worthwhile gains depend on teachers using the shows—and PBS-developed instructional materials and online games—as another instructional tool.

Ultimately teachers must supplement and expand upon the shows' lessons with their own classroom instruction, says Shelley Pasnik, director of the Education Development Center's Center for Children and Technology, which conducted one of the studies with SRI International.

The value of any television show depends on "how it's used," she says. "It's about engaged viewing and the engaged use of digital content. Literally it means stopping the [show], with kids then posing questions, with students air-writing letters or thinking about the characters and the sound of the letters ... really understanding the story. It's about all of that modeling that the teacher is doing with the child."

Whether school boards are looking at their school-based preschool programs—or collaborating with outside child providers who will send their children to next year's kindergarten—the study emphasizes the role of professional development in introducing any new instructional materials or teaching techniques to a preschool setting, Pasnik says.

"Although the media and digital content [provided by PBS] was a potent set of tools, it was really the coaching and hands-on support to instructors and adults in the classrooms that made a difference," she says. Preschool programs hoping to replicate the results, she adds, will need to provide coaching or ongoing support to preschool teachers.

The EDC/SRI research findings are based on a look at 398 low-income children at 47 preschool centers—including public school classrooms—in New York City and San Francisco. Children were taught with a special curriculum that included teacher-led TV viewing and hands-on play with letters, sounds, and books. Interactive games also were provided, and teachers—many of whom had little previous training in literacy instruction—received coaching and support during the study.

The other study, conducted by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, studied 171 preschoolers in a "large Pacific Northwest city."

Both studies' findings found youngsters were better able to identify letters, know the sounds associated with the letters, and understand basic concepts about stories and printed words. The gains weren't particularly profound—certainly nothing that a good teacher couldn't produce by other methods.

That might cause some educators to question how the studies have any practical value for them. After all, there's clear evidence that excessive TV viewing can negatively impact youngsters'



These characters from the TV show, "Between the Lions," are successful at teaching literacy skills to preschoolers—with help from classroom teachers, concludes a study sponsored by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

reading, and inappropriate content is generally detrimental to students. The American Academy of Pediatrics still warns against television viewing altogether for children under age 2.

But Pasnik says the study shows that PBS programming and instructional material offers preschool providers yet another set of instructional tools—something particularly useful in low-income communities where resources are scarce. "We were in places that really had a hunger for using resources and training in a new way."

Sharon Philippart, project director of PBS Kids' Raising Readers project, says PBS hopes to release later this year teacher training materials and classroom resources that allow others to use PBS programming as successfully as the preschools in the study.

"Our goal is to put [online material] in our digital learning library so that local schools, preschool providers, and local PBS stations can work together" to take advantage of PBS resources, she says. "We're very excited. We think this will be incredibly helpful to teachers and caregivers."

More information is available at www.pbs.org/aboutpbs/news/20090506_pbskidssuperwhy.html and www.sri.com/news/releases/101409.html.

Best Practices

Community schools model benefits students in many ways

Leveraging school, community resources expand services to students most in need

In tough economic times, it makes sense to use schools as efficiently as possible. It's logical to pool the resources of the school district, municipal agencies, and community service organizations to meet the needs of students where they spend most of their day—at school.

So it should come as no surprise that urban school districts—from Chicago to New York City, and from Portland, Ore., to St. Louis—embrace the community schools model. Working with community partners, urban schools are bringing health care services, after-school tutoring, social workers, parenting lessons, adult jobs training, and other useful programming right to the school site.

Some services, such as after-school tutoring, directly influence student learning, says Martin Blank, executive director of the Coalition for Community Schools, headquartered in Washington, D.C. But even when services don't directly deal with student achievement, it's clear that helping students cope with health issues or family problems ultimately clears away distractions that interfere with student learning.

What's more, working in partnership with other agencies also means schools can provide access to services they cannot otherwise afford to make available.

"The resources and, indeed, sometimes the expertise, that is needed to help educate all students don't lie within the school system and its staff," Blank says. "Schools under intense budget shortfalls must figure out how to get social supports, health supports, mental health supports to their children for them to succeed in school—and to help them deal with the outside-of-school factors that influence student learning."

Embracing the model

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) embraced this approach almost a decade ago. Today, 154 city schools receive addi-



This St. Louis student might not have the opportunity to take guitar lessons if Bevo-Long Community School wasn't so diligent in developing partnerships with outside community groups.

tional funding—from a few thousand dollars to nearly \$125,000—to support the operation of community partnerships and services at the schools.

Exactly what services are available at each school varies widely, depending on local needs as identified by parents, teachers, administrators, and a lead community partner at each school, says Erica Harris, director of CPS' Office of Extended Learning Opportunities.

In some schools, the main focus is directed at tutoring or student health care; at others, a major focus is to provide parenting classes and job training. Some school initiatives are fueled by an arts-based group hoping to enhance the school arts program; others are spearheaded by a local business leader or community group that sees a pressing need among parents.

The variety in programming is accepted by school policymakers, partly because of the logistical and administrative necessity of putting community service development in the hands of site-based staff, Harris says. Admittedly, var-

ied responses also stem from the energy and talent of school personnel to encourage and foster useful partnerships.

One challenge in making community schools successful is the natural resistance to new ways of doing things—and the tendency of organizations to work in isolation as they focus on their core missions, she adds.

"We had to get buy-in by both schools and [community group] partners, and historically, they haven't worked well together. They've been isolated institutions, and it wasn't the norm to work together. We really had to break down barriers."

The St. Louis Public Schools have used the community school model for years, but a new initiative has renamed some sites as Full Service Schools. The goals are different, says John Windom, executive director of the district's Office of Community Education, in that school officials are focusing their energy on fewer schools in hopes of providing "more depth" in the services offered.

As in Chicago, participating schools

will develop a unique offering of services based on an analysis of student and community needs at each school, Windom says. Those needs will be determined by school-based advisory councils and the principal after garnering input from parents, students, teachers, and citizens. To fuel this effort, officials have set aside \$1.7 million.

That's not a large investment given the aspirations of the program, but Windom says many school services will be provided by municipal agencies or community groups with existing programs. The school system, he says, simply is contributing space on school sites to allow service providers to work closer to students.

An important facet of these efforts, say school officials, is the hiring of a full-time program coordinator at each school. Someone must be totally focused on recruiting service providers, coordinating services to maximize their impact, and serving as liaison between school and partnering organizations. In Chicago, these coordinators typically are employed by each school's lead community partner; in St. Louis, they're hired by the school system.

"It's a mechanism that's needed," Blank says of these coordinators. "You need to aggregate those resources in a more purposeful way. You need to see how to pull these things together, to bring together community parents to talk about a relationship that can be more focused."

When partnerships work

When these partnerships work correctly, their impact is noticeable, notes *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools*, released by the Coalition for Community Schools. Fifteen of 20 community school initiatives studied showed improved student achievement, as well as showed gains in attendance and better student discipline. A number of schools also reported students had better access to health and mental health services and more contact with supportive adults.

The study also found that a community schools approach had a positive impact on the neighborhoods surrounding schools. By helping parents and other community adults, the neighborhood and home situations improved for students.

School officials point out that their partnerships can range both in scope and impact. In St. Louis, for example, some Full Service Schools are working with the city's job training and employment



MAKING A DIFFERENCE—

John Windom, St. Louis' executive director for community education (above), talks with staff about support services available to the city's Full Service Schools. At right, St. Louis students take advantage of after-school tutoring at Bevo-Long Community School, one of the city's new Full Service Schools.

agency to provide job training and employment search programs. One school helped four parents find work within its first few months.

Elsewhere, a chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women is distributing clothes to needy children, while a municipal agency working with the homeless is using schools to identify struggling families in danger of losing their residences.

Elsewhere in the nation, community schools are as varied as in Chicago and St. Louis. School districts and cities have pooled resources to build school-based libraries shared by both students and the community at large. Other districts have joined forces with municipal parks and recreation departments, YMCAs, and Boys and Girls Clubs to build and share athletic and recreational facilities.

Such partnerships create a shared sense of responsibility for the education—and well-being—of students, Blank says. And there are significant public relations benefits, as well.

That's certainly being seen in St. Louis, Windom says. "This is an effort of inclusion and strong partnering with the broader community. It is an opportunity to enhance community engagement. It's an opportunity to build good will for the district, and most important, it's an opportunity to provide services that enhance students achieving at high levels."

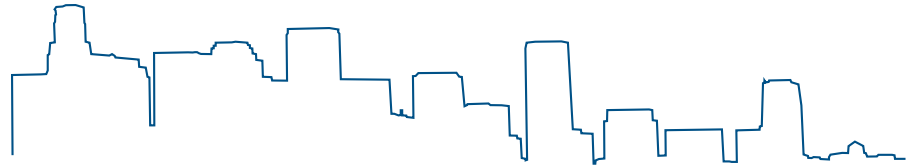
So why hasn't this concept, if so effective, gained more acceptance in recent years? Part of the problem is local school leaders often are so caught up in the minutia of school business that they overlook the long-term benefits of community schools.

Others fail to recognize that a coordinated community effort—one where all services are ultimately directed at student achievement—is more effective.

"The big vision here is a school that's the center of community life," he says. "It's a place where educators, families, and community partners care about the well-being of children, and the community comes together to get better results for children."

Working closely with outside agencies and organizations makes sense, Blank says. In today's society, "the school remains the central and primary institution that serves children, and therefore, it's where we should focus more resources and opportunities. Children have real needs, and schools are vehicles to help them."

For urban school leaders interested in learning more, CUBE is sponsoring an Urban Advocacy Skills Building session on community schools and their successful implementation on Sunday, April 11, at 2 p.m. during the 70th Annual NSBA Annual Conference and Exposition in Chicago.



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