



BEING BLACK
IS NOT A RISK FACTOR:



*Including a foreword
written by*
BARBARA T. BOWMAN



**A STRENGTHS-BASED
LOOK AT THE STATE
OF THE BLACK CHILD**



NBCDI
National Black Child
Development Institute

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BEING BLACK

"I want to be chocolate like you, Mommy," said my four-year old daughter, whose skin is caramel next to my own coffee colored hue. What does being Black mean to her? It means being part of our family, our community and our culture. It means being smart and strong. She doesn't know that for many people, it also means a check mark next to a list of risk factors. She doesn't know that being the Black daughter of a single Black mother means that the statistics, and those who take them as a prediction of her future in addition to a reflection of today's reality, will write her off as another child who is, simply, less likely to succeed.

This publication, *Being Black Is Not a Risk Factor: A Strengths-Based Look at the State of the Black Child*, is personal for me, and it should be personal for you too, regardless of your own skin color. Our children will inherit this world together. And we don't believe that some of those children—the Black ones—are wrong. We don't think they are bad. We don't think they are doomed to failure. We fully understand the crises. We work with our children. We talk to our parents. We read the statistics—the poverty rates, the test scores, the health outcomes—and we are broken hearted.

But we also know our strengths and our successes. We know the stories behind the statistics. We may not have all of the answers, but we, collectively, have some of them. There are things that work—and there are things that don't. You can't call a father an "ineffective parent" and then wonder why he doesn't show up to your parenting education event. You can't tell a child she's never going to amount to anything, and then wonder why she doesn't. The words we use; the expectations we hold; the beliefs in our hearts—all of these things matter. Ensuring that we provide sufficient and equitably distributed resources? This matters too. Morally, yes, but also because research says these things matter in achieving better outcomes for our children.

This is what the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) is about. Since 1970, we have been dedicated to our mission of "improving and advancing the quality of life for Black children and their families through education and advocacy." *Being Black Is Not a Risk Factor* is designed to further this mission and challenge the prevailing discourse about Black children. While recognizing the challenges our children face, this report does not overemphasize their limitations and deficits; rather, contributors from the worlds of research, practice and policy celebrate the considerable strengths, assets and resilience demonstrated by our children, families and communities.

This report weaves together three critical elements:

- 1. Essays from experts that focus on using our children's, families' and communities' strengths to improve outcomes for Black children**
- 2. "Points of Proof" from organizations that serve not as exceptions, but as examples of places where Black children and families are succeeding**
- 3. Data points that indicate how our children and families are doing across a range of measures**

We anticipate that this report, as well as the resources to follow, will help to address the needs of policymakers, advocates, principals, teachers, parents and others who are looking to do right by our children, by adopting new ways of thinking and implementing meaningful action steps for moving forward.

In spite of the challenges facing us, as a community and as a country, we are hopeful. We know that things have, can and will change, not because wishing will make it so, but because of the commitment and hard work undertaken every day by those who care for, educate, support, lead, love and nurture our children and their families. As Elizabeth Alexander read from her poem written on the occasion of the Inauguration of the first Black President of the United States of America,

*"In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,
praise song for walking forward in that light."*

We celebrate and cherish our children. They are not risks, but rewards. We believe that the true state of the Black child lies in their natural curiosity, excitement and genius, and we believe that they will indeed walk forward in the light.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Felicia DeHaney".

FELICIA DEHANEY, PH.D.
President and CEO

National Black Child Development Institute

Foreword

THE STATE OF THE BLACK CHILD

BARBARA T. BOWMAN

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Erikson Institute

It is no secret that life is more challenging for African American children than for other American children. The continuing legacy of segregation and discrimination feeds poverty—of the body and the spirit—and casts a shadow over their lives. Many are mired in a level of poverty that carries significant physical and mental dangers. They are likely to live in segregated and poorly resourced communities, with poor schools, poor housing, poor employment opportunities and a hostile outside world. And even families who escape the stifling effects of poverty are handicapped by the inequalities they experience daily. Evidence of racial disparities can be found everywhere—in housing, insurance, business, and funding for schools, as well as in racial profiling, job discrimination and more severe sentencing by courts. One should not wonder at the number of families that succumb to these hazards, but at the number who live their lives with dignity and hope.

The child rearing practices of African American families are different, in some instances quite different, from those of other Americans. Comparisons of White and Black child rearing usually results in finding fault with African American families' ways of raising children. Yet, except for those families struggling under the most extreme social pressure, Black families provide their children with the developmental supports necessary for healthy development. The vast majority of African American children are supported

by their families; they walk, talk, love, make categories, represent ideas, use symbols, etc., even though they may do these things in different ways than White children. Difficulties arise because African Americans do not have access to the skills and knowledge considered necessary for success embedded in White institutional arrangements. Further, the social and economic constraints of living Black in America may make some aspects of White child rearing a hazard for Black children. The challenge for African American families is to prepare children for current realities without limiting their ability to succeed in the larger community.

That is what this book is about. While it inventories the challenges facing African American children and families and the failure of various systems to address their needs, it also tells the story of resiliency in the face of despair. It is about the risks and the successes of Black families who love and protect their children to the best of their ability. It is also about what African Americans and the larger society can do to ensure a better tomorrow. What is provided here is a handbook for families and community helpers such as teachers, librarians, coaches and policemen, giving them the information they need to recognize the strength of the community and to design services that build on those strengths.

A rich body of issues and options are offered. Should we concentrate on only the poorest children? How should we balance academic content and children's interests? Should we focus equally on all the years between birth and age 8 (infancy to 3rd grade) or only on preschool/primary years? Should we aim toward excellence (even if only for a few) or be satisfied with incremental gains across a wider audience? Should we look for gender differences and design education with that in mind? How important is the history of our community in leveraging change?

IDEALLY, THIS BOOK WILL BE USED TO JUMP START A SERIOUS DISCUSSION ABOUT THE STRENGTHS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, AND THE WAYS IN WHICH THEY CAN BEST BE SUPPORTED AS THEY REACH FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM.



MINORITY CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES: A POSITIVE LOOK

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In many ways, being a minority in the U.S. has become synonymous with being poor, struggling in school, having an absent or uninvolved dad, and being headed toward a life of disadvantage and less promise. This negative portrayal is based on a long line of research that shows how poverty is linked to a host of negative outcomes for children (Huston, 1991; Huston & Bentley, 2010). While the negative effect that adversity and poverty can have on children and families is indisputable, the fact that many minority children are succeeding in schools and that their families are able to provide and support them is not well documented (Cabrera, Beeghly, & Eisenberg, 2012; Crosnoe & Fuligni, 2012; McLoyd, 1990, 2006; Quintana et al., 2006). Consequently, with few exceptions, we know more about maladaptation than adaptation among minority children. We know more about why minority children fail than we know about why they succeed. The result is an unbalanced picture that overemphasizes the deficits and pays little attention to the assets or strengths that minority parents and children bring to the table.²

In this essay, I will focus on the cultural, ecological and structural forces that enhance minority children's capabilities in different domains (e.g., social, emotional and cognitive) and across different developmental periods (e.g., infancy, childhood and adolescence) as well as identify pathways to positive development. In other words, I will focus on positive development, broadly defined as research that focuses on adaptation and adjustment rather than maladjustment and adversity.

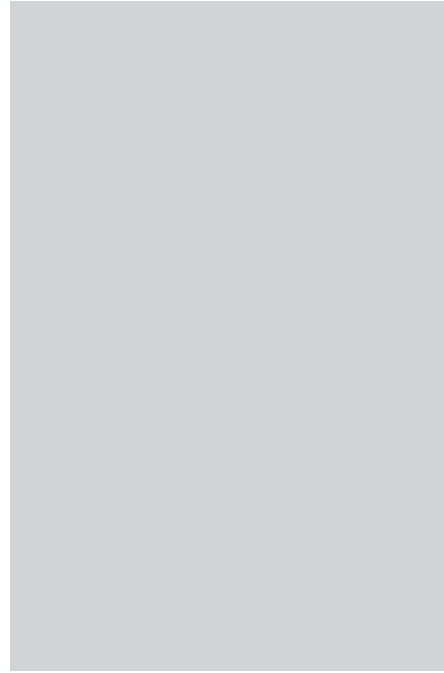
WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE LIFE COURSE OF CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES WHO ARE NOT WHITE?

Despite several efforts (e.g., special issues and sections of *Child Development* in 1990, 2006, and *Child Development Perspectives*, 2012) devoted to advancing research on minority children, this body of research is still not as rich, nuanced or prevalent as that for White children. Studies of middle-class minority families, for example, are rare. Most of the classic studies on minority children are based on low-income families who are more likely to experience hardship due to economic, social and language barriers. These studies have provided important information about the problem behaviors or academic failure of minority children but less about the considerable within-group variation regarding family's education, income, beliefs, values, childrearing styles and the economic and social investments families make in their children, which can result in positive outcomes (Larson, 2000; McLoyd, 1990, 2006). Thus, we know little about what adaptation looks like for minority families who are poor as well as what it looks like for minority families who are not poor.

RESEARCH ON POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT

A focus on children who are expected to do poorly based on risk factors (e.g., poverty), but do well and those who are expected to do well, based on lack of risk factors (e.g., affluent children), but do not is at the core of the resilience paradigm. Increased efforts to understand the role of resilience in child development have been central to asking pivotal questions, such as "Why are some children who grow up in high-risk environments able to cope with these challenges successfully while others are not?" and "What are the protective systems of an individual and of the social, cultural and religious contexts?" (Masten & Wright, 2009).

New insights from developmental neuroscience such as gene-moderating effects on adversity (Meaney, 2010) and demographic, sociological, anthropological and cultural studies are revolutionizing our understanding of how biological, social and psychological determinants may contribute to positive developmental pathways for minority children. The availability of sophisticated developmental models and methods (Damon & Lerner, 2008) and developmental research on ethnic minority children grounded in dynamic bio-ecological systems approaches is emerging (Spencer, 2008). The groundbreaking research on the "neurobiology of resilience" is aiming to understand the neuroendocrine markers that might prevent individuals who, in the face of extreme stress, resist developing psychopathology and those who do not (Cisler et al., 2012; Russo et al., 2012). Other research is showing that the absence of stress is not necessarily optimal. There is research suggesting that the experience of facing "some" difficulties can promote benefits such as a greater propensity



for self-reliance when adverse life events occur (Seery, 2011). These findings have important implications for interventions and understanding the neurobiological basis for promoting positive development.

WHAT IS A POSITIVE OUTCOME?

Is it more than the absence of negative outcomes? While minority children may be faced with more challenges than majority children, many of them do not experience severe risk and adversity. Therefore, the resilience framework is important, but perhaps less suitable as a general framework to understand what are the promotive (not just protective) factors that support positive development of minority children.

Overall, research on ethnic minority child development increasingly reflects the recognition that cultural resources, constraints and children's unique ecological contexts (Weisner, 2002) are critical to understanding optimal development in these populations (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012). Numerous studies have shown that, in general, low-income minority children show deficits in areas such as receptive language abilities and vocabulary mainly as a function of the economic hardship experienced by their families (Champion, Hyter, McCabe, & Bland-Stewart, 2003). However, recent research suggests that prior studies of development might have overlooked or understudied developmental assets among minority children (Bialystok, Majumder, & Martin, 2003). New findings show that, overall, minority children show strengths in at least two domains of development: social competence and language.

Social competence. In early childhood, for instance, several investigators have found that low-income, ethnic minority children exhibit high levels of self-regulation and other social-emotional skills, which may promote school readiness and later academic success (Blair & Razza, 2007; Cheah et al., 2009; Cunningham, Kliwer, & Garner, 2009; Galindo & Fuller, 2010; LiGrining, 2012; Raver, 2004). Findings based on a national representative sample of kindergartners in the U.S. show that the majority of Latino children, for example, enter kindergarten with strong social skills (Crosnoe, 2006; DeFeyter & Winsler, 2009; Galindo & Fuller, 2010). Others have shown that low-income, African American preschoolers exhibit strong social and social-cognitive skills, such as those required for sustained peer-play interactions, which have been shown to promote school readiness (Fantuzzo et al. 1998)

Where do these strong social competence skills come from? In a multi-wave, longitudinal study of African American, school-aged children living in rural, single-parent families, Brody (2002) found that demographic factors such as higher maternal education and per capita family income were linked to better maternal psychosocial adaptation (e.g., lower depressive symptoms, higher



self-esteem and optimism) at Wave 1, which predicted positive parenting at Wave 2, which, in turn, forecasted better child psychosocial adaptation, social competence and cognitive competence at Wave 3.

Linguistic strengths. Although, relative to middle-class European American children, low-income African American preschoolers are often portrayed as exhibiting delays in expressive vocabulary (Champion et al., 2003; Washington, 2001), their oral-narrative skills may be a unique area of strength that may promote later success in reading achievement (Champion et al., 2003; Curenton & Justice, 2004; Gardner-Neblett, Pungello, & Iruka, 2012). The story is similar for bilingual minority children. Although bilingualism appears to have both benefits and costs, the costs in terms of smaller vocabularies and weaker access to lexical items than monolinguals have been overemphasized. The benefits in terms of enhanced executive control in non-verbal tasks requiring conflict resolution are just now beginning to be recognized (Bialystok & Craik, 2010; Cummins, 2001; Diamond, 2010) along with other positive effects of bilingualism on cognitive processes during the early childhood education period (Adesope et al., 2010; Engel de Abreu et al., 2012; Han, 2012; Stoessel, Titzmann, & Silbereisen, 2011).

In later childhood and adolescence, other factors such as the formation of a strong ethnic identity and positive attitudes toward civic engagement emerge as potential promotive factors for some children. Security and pride in one's own racial and ethnic identity are shown to promote more positive peer and family relationships and self-esteem (Phinney, 1993). These sentiments can be fostered through civic engagement, especially with members of other racial or ethnic groups' activities, which is important because it involves individuals building and sustaining the community, decreasing risk behavior and promoting positive social behaviors, such as voting (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

HOW FAMILIES AND PARENTS FOSTER POSITIVE ADAPTATION

Research on the role of parents, families and communities contributing to the positive development of ethnic minority children and youth has exploded in the last 10 years (McLoyd, 2006). As with other families, minority families help their children develop positive attachment relationships with healthy adults (MacDonald et al., 2008), support them in becoming socially competent and participate in growth-promoting activities such as early childhood education and after-school programs. In addition, although not extensively studied, there are a number of promising studies showing links between strong family orientations and minority children's development (Mistry et al., 2002). Children who have a strong family orientation tend to exhibit fewer behavior problems, report more friends and be more socially competent than their counterparts. These

promotive factors may not only create a positive developmental pathway for children, but also prevent the occurrence of later problems.

Research has shown that racial-ethnic and cultural socialization (i.e., teaching children about the norms, values and expectations of their cultural group), although important for all children, is particularly prevalent among ethnic minority families and largely considered a positive adaptive skill, especially when it also includes teaching children how to cope with racism (Evans et al., 2012; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009). Parents' efforts to teach their children about their family's cultural background and children's identification with their culture's norms, values, beliefs, practices and rituals offer protective benefits in the form of higher self-esteem, a sense of belonging and positive outlook that protects them from the negative effects of discrimination and prejudice. Parents who discuss issues of discrimination and help children to be proud of their culture and themselves have children who are less likely to be influenced by racial or ethnic discrimination (Harris-Britt, Valrie, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2007).

African American preschoolers have been shown to benefit (e.g., perform better on cognitive tests and exhibit fewer emotional and behavioral problems) from home environments reflecting elements of African American culture (Caughy et al., 2002). Similarly, Native American youth who report higher levels of identification with their culture and participation in activities reflective of their culture were more likely to classify as resilient (LaFromboise et al., 2006). One of the mechanisms by which cultural socialization is related to adaptation is through its impact on racial-ethnic identity (Schweigman et al., 2011). Such a pathway is important because having a positive racial-ethnic identity is also predictive of positive psychosocial adjustment (Jones & Galliher, 2007; Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, & Guimond, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

Ethnic minority children are disproportionately more likely than White children in the U.S. to be raised in low-income households, and we know that poverty, with its myriad stressors, exerts deleterious direct effects on children's health and development (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Indirect effects of poverty on children's outcomes (e.g., via its effects on caregivers' well-being and parenting quality) are also well documented. However, in this essay I highlighted important capabilities—such as social skills and the ability to regulate, control, and manage other cognitive processes—that minority children bring to the table as well as the ways in which minority families promote their development. These strengths need to be considered alongside the challenges to get a full and comprehensive picture of minority children. This balanced approach will also help target and tailor interventions to not only fix the problems, but also build on the strengths.

FAITH & CONFIDENCE: POSITIONING OUR HEARTS AND MINDS TO ASSURE SUCCESS IN THE LIVES OF BLACK CHILDREN

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In a sense, the state of Black children is a direct reflection of adults' values, beliefs, and perceptions of them—how we see them can essentially affect who and what they become. Knowing this should serve as a reminder to us to constantly reflect, examine and strengthen our perspectives in order to transform their lives.

Two important vital assumptions should serve as priorities to guide our actions. We must have:

1. **Faith that our children can grow up strong**
2. **Confidence that our community's cultural essence can be a contributor to children's growth and development**

Take the state of Black children in the formal education domain as a case in point. While the current educational situation for Black children is embodied in the problem commonly referred to as the "achievement gap," faith that our children can grow up strong would lead us to the following starting assumption:

- ✓ **Not only is it possible to eliminate the achievement gap—it is possible to prevent the gap from appearing in the first place.**

Moreover, confidence in our community's cultural essence would lead to a second starting assumption:

- ✓ **Only by embracing a deep understanding of the role of cultural influences on development as we work as human development professionals³ and service providers, can we design and implement effective programs.**

Let's examine and discuss each perspective.

FAITH THAT OUR CHILDREN CAN GROW UP STRONG

The news about the status of Black children is not good. Pick nearly any indicator of the quality of life for children and you find Black and Latino children today at the highest levels of distress. What's happened to us? Surely we haven't stopped caring, nor have we forgotten how to provide what children need. No, I think we are overcome with a deep and unconscious fear that this country's social ills are unfixable. Each time we read the tragic stories about of children's lives, it feeds this sense of hopelessness.

I remember many years ago reading a front page article in the *Los Angeles Times* about an elaborate 8th grade graduation party given by some Hollywood stars for a class of low income Black youngsters in Watts. The article empathized with and praised the motivation of the party sponsors, because they said "it was probably the last graduation these kids would ever have." I remember thinking how subtly the message reinforced for readers the low expectation for these children's futures.

Examples like this are far too many, and occur as well within our professional literature. For example, Dr. Walter Gilliam from the Yale University Child Study Center completed a study about three and four year old children who were expelled from publicly funded prekindergarten programs (Gilliam, 2005). The report indicated that a higher percentage of children being put out were African-American; and that among the African Americans put out of preschool, 91% were boys. This study was followed by a subsequent summary report including recommendations designed to correct the situation (Gilliam, 2005), yet among the four main findings and the eight recommendations, not a single mention was made of this alarming statistic, nor was addressing it conveyed as a priority. Again, a subtle, albeit unintentional, sense that nothing much could be done to change things for these boys.

Expectations like these influence how we behave. If we expect nothing to change, then nothing will. They generate a mindset of hopelessness and hopelessness can create an atmosphere where fixable problems become unfixable ones. We must work to resist this erosion in our belief in the potential of our own behavior and actions to change things, and make a conscious effort to have



WHAT SHALL I TELL MY CHILDREN WHO ARE BLACK?

...What can I do to give him strength
That he may come through life's adversities
As a whole human being unwarped and human in a world
Of biased laws and inhuman practices, that he might
Survive. And survive he must! For who knows?
Perhaps this black child here bears the genius
To discover the cure for... cancer
Or to chart the course for exploration of the universe.
So, he must survive for the good of all humanity.

– Margaret Burroughs

Educator, artist, poet and founder of
the DuSable Museum of African American
History in Chicago



BEING LABELED "AT RISK" IS LIKE BEING VOTED
LEAST LIKELY TO SUCCEED. FOR WHERE THERE
IS NO FAITH IN YOUR FUTURE SUCCESS, THERE
IS NO REAL EFFORT TO PREPARE YOU FOR IT.

faith in our children as the geniuses that they are. We must also know that maintaining this state of mind will take constant work because we are being fed information every day that “they just bad kids;” “they momma don’t care;” and “these children are at risk.” Being labeled “at risk” is like being voted least likely to succeed. For where there is no faith in your future success, there is no real effort to prepare you for it.

We should know better than to fall victim to this helplessness/hopelessness syndrome. For we know that our children come into this world as bright, capable human beings—geniuses until proven otherwise. We know that it is possible to keep children from quitting school; that it is possible to fill children’s lives with health and wholeness; and that it is possible to provide the needy young in our communities with the kind of help that can eventually transform their lives and ours.

CONFIDENCE THAT OUR COMMUNITY’S CULTURAL ESSENCE CAN BE A CONTRIBUTOR TO CHILDREN’S GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Public school education through the years has evolved to the belief that multicultural education (as a remedy for monocultural education) could “fix” whatever it was that Black children’s culture has done to them to reduce their educability. While some researchers, educators and organizations have made a strong case for the importance of cultural competency as a key element of high-quality early care and education, there remain limited tools available to infuse culture as a vehicle for learning.

Despite this, however, we must remain confident in the enormous potential this approach has for our children’s success in education and in life. The task is an enormous one, for any approach with cultural integrity will require at a minimum changing the way we see culture and its influence on development. In many attempts thus far, superficial aspects of culture have been treated and found insufficient to contribute to academic gains. Going forward, then, we will need to focus more on the deep structure of culture—deeply held values and beliefs—using those to empower human development professionals to create their own sound and effective strategies for working with Black children and families. How do we do this?

First, we must look to voices from within the cultural community itself as sources of expertise. Reading what has been written about the development of children and families by researchers, theorists and writers from an African American cultural perspective and processing the information are must-dos. To mediate the process of ensuring reliability and validity, ideas should not necessarily be taken at face value, but should be subjected to analyses, in

discussions with colleagues, parents, community members and others who have experience in the culture. Are the descriptions and ideas valid in their experiences? How can the information best be used in work with families and children? We must stay open to new insights and evolving ideas as the discussions continue and be aggressive in seeking out new ideas from diverse sources. It is not always easy to find materials that are not written from a mainstream perspective but they do exist; book exhibitors at conferences and alternative magazines can be good sources, as can elders within cultural communities.

Second, we want to become proficient in understanding how negative responses to culture and race contribute to the underdevelopment of our children. As part of our responsibility to position ourselves in our work to remove obstacles to children’s development, we must learn to identify ethnocentrism in the theories and practice to which we have traditionally subscribed, and race bias in the institutions with which we interface. If there is racial and/or cultural bias in the society surrounding our schools, then it is very likely to be also reflected somewhere within the school policy and practices, rendering judgments of superiority and inferiority on children. As we look for and discuss the ways these value judgments are embodied within institutions that are assumed to be universal, we are able to be increasingly reflective and articulate about the cultural lens through which we view the world. We want to get to a place where we can discuss race and cultural issues in conversations and meetings just as easily as we talk about making puppets or play dough.

Third, we need to shift from an emphasis on multiculturalism, where the melting pot theme prevails, to an emphasis on pluralism where the preservation of home culture is an important developmental goal for children and families. As cultural communities evolve, we must continue to examine and assess the choices we are able to offer to our children in terms of relationships to other cultural communities and to mainstream culture. Being constantly aware of the tensions between views on cultural assimilation, and exploring ways to exercise pluralism without it being a threat to maintaining common societal norms are important processes to maintain. In a time of growing cultural diversity, we must engage in practical and concrete ways to honor various cultural values and styles of doing things while maintaining unity and allegiance to a common society.

OUR JOBS ON BEHALF OF CHILDREN DEMAND US TO WORK ON OURSELVES AS ADULTS. WE NEED TO ENSURE WE STAY SHARP, MAKING CONTINUOUS EFFORTS TO IMPROVE OURSELVES, OUR HEARTS AND OUR MINDS TO ASSURE SUCCESS IN THE LIVES OF BLACK CHILDREN.

IF WOMEN ARE EMPOWERED TO MAKE HEALTHY DECISIONS FOR THEMSELVES, THEIR BABIES, CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES, THEY WILL.

POINT OF PROOF:

GREAT BEGINNINGS FOR BLACK BABIES, INC.

INGLEWOOD, CALIFORNIA

Through a variety of creative and culturally relevant programs, Great Beginnings for Black Babies influences healthy birth outcomes by providing women with the proper tools to make informed health decisions for themselves and their families. In addition to healthy birth outcomes, our goal is promote the healthy development and growth of babies and children; and to promote healthy and strengthened outcomes for families. This also is our mission. Our programs include Black Infant Health (BIH), Healthy Moms and Babies (HMB), the Fatherhood Initiative (FI) and a Youth Education After School Program, which serves 200 children daily at two at-risk elementary schools.

WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”

Great Beginnings for Black Babies was founded in 1990, specifically to impact infant mortality in the African American community. At that time, 19 of every 1,000 Black babies were dying before their first birthday. In 2013, 13 of every 1,000 are dying. And while disparities still exist, Great Beginnings has impacted the lives of thousands of women and babies by encouraging healthy lifestyles devoid of tobacco, alcohol and drugs. Through one program alone, more than 500 women annually are provided with case management services including assessments, referrals, home visitations, Social Support and Empowerment sessions, as well as health and nutrition education.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?

Black Infant Health (BIH) serves over 500 pregnant and/or parenting African American women ages 18 years or older with children up to 18 months old. Healthy Moms and Babies (HMB) serves women of all ethnicities and ages (including teen mothers) with children up to age five. More than 200 men have participated in workshops and support groups of the Fatherhood Initiative, and 200 children are served daily in our school-based program. Eighty-nine percent of our female clients are single; 67% are not employed; 57% indicate their partner offers no emotional support and 59% report their partner has been in jail in the past three years.

HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

Participants in our BIH, HMB and FI programs generally come to us at very low points in their lives. In addition to their health issues, they also are presenting with socio-economic issues and sometimes mental health issues. We see our work as helping them become whole—whether it be referring them out for services or helping them locate employment, housing, insurance, etc. We define success when a client makes the effort to set goals and puts in the work to meet them. We have many client testimonies that confirm that what we’re doing is on point.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

When a client keeps their prenatal visits, has a healthy baby, has a “normal” birth, initiates breastfeeding, enthusiastically participates in our Social Support and Empowerment sessions and other workshops, is in a healthy relationship, finds and retains housing, becomes gainfully employed or goes back to school to complete their education—these are the indicators that we use to measure success. We use entrance and exit interviews to determine client progress, as well as uploading this information into our Management Information System for further analysis. We also track clients for a minimum of 18 months, which includes home visits, a system which tells us that that clients in our programs are achieving significantly higher levels of success than those who were not. The goals that we set and that clients set for themselves were and are being met.

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

A large part of success is contingent upon having passionate, dedicated staff with whom clients can positively interact and respond. Case management services are not successful if clients feel they are being judged and/or stereotyped. Many of Great Beginnings employees have experienced some of the same things our clients are going through and as a result are able to offer a level of sensitivity that may not otherwise be forthcoming. Clients sense a level of sincerity and a relationship is established in which the client benefits significantly. They tell us what they need and we listen and respond. Indeed, our client population significantly shapes the services we provide as we design programs around their needs. And despite the fact that, as with most social service programs serving communities of color, GBBB has been hard hit by funding cuts, our work remains respected throughout the community and Los Angeles County. This respect and our outcomes allow us to enjoy a mix of private and public funding that helps us to support families on the path to healthy lifestyles, which positively impacts the community overall.

INFANT MORTALITY RATES FOR CHILDREN BORN TO BLACK MOTHERS ARE ALMOST TWICE THE NATIONAL AVERAGE. FOR BLACK MOTHERS IN 2009, THERE WERE 12.4 DEATHS FOR EVERY 1,000 LIVE BIRTHS COMPARED TO THE NATIONAL AVERAGE OF 6.39¹⁰

17%

OF BLACK BABIES ARE BORN PRETERM
(AT LESS THAN 37 WEEKS) FOR ALL RACES, THE RATE IS 12%¹¹

14%

OF BLACK BABIES BORN IN 2010 HAD A LOW BIRTH WEIGHT
(LESS THAN 5.5 POUNDS) COMPARED TO 8% FOR ALL RACES¹²

THE SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM FOR WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN (WIC) PROVIDES NUTRITION AND HEALTH SUPPORT TO YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR MOTHERS IN AN EFFORT TO IMPROVE CHILD DEVELOPMENT, HEALTH AND NUTRITION. OF THE INDIVIDUALS ENROLLED IN WIC,

19% ARE BLACK WHILE 61% ARE WHITE¹³



ON ENHANCING ACADEMIC OUTCOMES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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For over 50 years, this nation's decision makers have deemed it a national priority to put concentrated attention on the academic plight of ethnic minority children in general and African American children in particular. In more recent years, the rationale for such a focus has shifted from one of moral righteousness and the pursuit of social justice, to the more practical realization that unless or until we are able to witness greater widespread academic success among children of color, then American society in general will simply not have the level of well-prepared human resources it will need to address the challenges and opportunities this nation must contend with in the 21st century.

Yet in spite of this increased and more deep-seated urgency, and the implementation of such efforts such as NCLB and Race to the Top, the academic performance of all too many African American children and youth remains woefully low, and the achievement gap between Black and White children remains unacceptably large. There are likely several reasons for this state of affairs. Prominent among these is that, in spite of rhetoric and good intentions to the contrary, educational practice in our nation is largely still animated by the paradigm of *talent identification and sorting*. In this regard, formal education, coupled with its customary assessment tools, functions primarily as a way to discern which students are the talented, smart, able, motivated and best equipped ones. And in turn, by implication, it separates

out those students who are judged to be less well-endowed. All too often this leads to differential treatment, labels and perceptions that are readily understood by students, even at relatively young ages. Students consciously or implicitly come to know their place in the educational pecking order, and in turn, often act and think accordingly.

Moreover, pervasive among educational reformers is the stance of *benevolent pathology*. This is the notion that children from certain ethnic minority or low-income backgrounds have life experiences that hamper the possibility that they can learn or achieve well in school. These deficiencies or pathologies are viewed as unfortunate and must be compensated for through remediation, extra learning time, or other benevolent interventions so that the children can overcome the academic obstacles rooted in no fault of their own. Success is indexed by how well these children can then approximate the approaches displayed by their counterparts who have had more access to mainstream experiences and in turn comport themselves in mainstream educational ways. As long as talent sorting and identification, linked to benevolent pathology, privilege and entitlement prevail, the possibility of authentic, substantial and sustainable progress in closing achievement gaps will not occur.

However, a different stance on school reform is also available. It has been called in recent years the *human capacity building or human capital production position*. Rather than schools functioning to identify and sort talent, their chief responsibility would be to develop talent. This capacity promotion stance would discern diversity in students' backgrounds and lived experiences not as reasons for their failure, but as sources from which to glean their assets. These assets would then be used to promote students to high-level academic outcomes. And when such assets are not readily available, the press is then to create assets for such students in the academic setting.

There is mounting evidence that supports the capacity building and talent development approach in terms of its enabling potency to raise achievement levels for all students, while simultaneously closing performance gaps between minority group and majority group children. This evidence has accrued across early childhood on through high school levels of schooling. The underlying posture that animates this stance is that there is *integrity*, not simply pathology, which inheres in the life experiences of, for example, African American children. Integrity by definition connotes that there is complexity, coherence and depth contained in the life experiences of African American people and that a focus on deficiencies, deprivations and weaknesses occludes the reality of such experiences and robs even well-intentioned educators from utilizing such integrity-based factors to enhance academic outcomes for people of African descent in America.



In examining the literature on what can raise achievement and close performance gaps, some other insights have been revealed. In addressing educational disparities, it is important to distinguish between two categories of reform activities: *technocratic and transactional*. Technocratic solutions have clearly been ones to which educational decision makers have most often subscribed. They entail changes in school procedures, regulatory practices and structural factors around which schooling is organized. Examples of these reforms include extending the school day or the school year, reducing class size, actualizing school choice or reconstituting schools. There are also, however, transactional solutions, which concern efforts to optimize the learning exchanges that transpire inside classrooms and other learning settings between teachers, students and among students themselves. These optimized interactions then form the fundamental bases of everyday teaching and learning in which teachers and students mutually influence each other in cyclical and recursive ways. To be sure, we should not view technocratic and transactional solutions in an either/or way. Instead we should realize that technocratic solutions in and of themselves are not sufficient. Transactional approaches should be embedded in technocratic changes, resulting in ongoing, transformed practices and procedures, if the goal ultimately is to create more successful outcomes for our students.

The human capacity building framework is part of a transactional approach in which pervasive *opportunity to learn* is manifested particularly in terms of what students say, do, understand or feel with regard to lessons, learning activities and subject matter, inside classrooms on an everyday basis. An important beacon of such opportunity is well captured by the construct of *student engagement* (Kelly and Turner, 2009; Skinner, Kinderman, and Furrer, 2009), which should be receiving substantially more attention in education reform as a proximal academic outcome. The construct of engagement, however, is not simply synonymous with time on task. Instead, real student engagement connotes active, positive, and progressive involvement in the learning process.

Engagement is three dimensional, involving a *behavioral* component which entails level of effort and persistence, a *motivational* component which entails positive interest, value and affect, and a *cognitive* component, which entails deep processing of information and higher order thinking (Boykin and Noguera, 2011). Recent research illuminates that, across the K-12 spectrum, students' behavioral, motivational and cognitive engagement in their academic tasks serves as a crucial bellwether for their ultimate academic achievement (Ainley and Ainley, 2011; Li and Lerner, 2011; Strambler and Weinstein, 2010).

Mounting evidence also supports the everyday deployment of *asset-focused strategies* which function to maximize increased student opportunities to learn via greater engagement, and thus contribute greatly to enhanced student achievement outcomes. When these assets are incorporated into classroom teaching and learning transactions, they can be particularly beneficial for ethnic minority students across the K-12 continuum. As the term implies, taken together, these asset-focused strategies function to acknowledge and build on the assets that students from diverse backgrounds bring with them into learning settings. And when such assets are not evident, strategies are enacted to create assets for these students as needed (Boykin and Noguera, 2011). To implement identified asset based strategies is to actualize the following elements:

- **Positive teacher-student relationship quality (TSRQ), marked by caring, support, and high expectations (Hughes, 2011; Graves and Howes, 2011; Crosnoe et al, 2010);**
- **Collaborative learning, marked by collaborative intellectual exchanges among group members (Slavin, Lake, and Groff, 2009; Johnson and Johnson, 2009; Boykin and Noguera, 2011);**
- **Mastery of classroom goal structures, marked by a focus on student understanding, effort and improvement (Fast et al, 2010; Patrick, Kaplan, and Ryan, 2011; Rolland, 2012);**
- **Meaningful learning, marked by a focus on personal relevance and links to prior knowledge and experiences (Cohen et al, 2009; Crumpton and Gregory, 2009);**
- **Cultural significance, marked by links to family socialization and traditions, fundamental core values and popular culture (Hurley, Allen, and Boykin, 2009; Majors and Ansari, 2009; Waddell, 2010; Warikoo and Carter, 2009; Sampson and Wade, 2011); and**
- **The direct teaching of information processing skills such as problem solving strategies and critical thinking techniques (William et al, 2009; Cantrell et al, 2010; Benjamin and Tullis, 2010; Ramani and Siegler, 2011).**

Focusing on early childhood learners, the work of Bodovski and Farkas (2007) demonstrates that a focus on *engaged* time is more crucial than on *instruction* time. In this investigation, using a nationally representative sample, they



examined growth in mathematics performance from kindergarten to 3rd grade. Students were broken down into quartiles based on kindergarten-level math skills and knowledge scores. Students in the lowest quartile (described in the study as coming largely from “disadvantaged” backgrounds) received the most instruction time. Yet the study found that these students grew the least in their achievement, while the two upper quartile students gained the most by the 3rd grade. At the same time, the study found the lowest quartile students had the lowest engagement levels. These results occurred despite the fact that engagement was a stronger predictor of growth for this group than it was for higher performing groups. The conclusion here is that engaged time is particularly more important than instruction time for students in the lowest quartile.

Elsewhere, Hamre and Pianta (2005) have demonstrated the academic potency of positive TSRQ (teacher-student relationship quality). They found that providing emotional support has gap closing consequences in the early elementary grades and encourage the development of classroom practices such as (1) teacher sensitivity to a child’s needs; (2) teacher reluctance to impose her or his agenda unilaterally onto the child; (3) teacher creation of a positive affective climate; and (4) teacher deployment of classroom management marked by clear yet flexible expectations and behavioral guidelines. These practices, in fact, more positively impacted low-achieving and ethnic minority students. Yet intriguingly, recent work by Spilt et al. (2012) showed that across the K-3 spectrum, Black students were more likely to be in low-warmth and high-conflict classrooms, relative to their White counterparts.

Similarly, Stipek (2004) examined teaching approaches deployed in over 130 1st grade classrooms across both the East and West coasts in this country. She found that two distinct pedagogical forms predominated, which she labeled *constructivist* and *didactic* teaching respectively. Key elements of constructivist teaching included (1) phonics instruction embedded in meaningful text; (2) modeling and guided use of explicit comprehension strategies; (3) connection to children’s personal experiences; and (4) encouragement of self-expression. All of these elements fit well among the asset-focused strategies listed above. On the other hand, didactic teaching examples included (1) isolated phonics instruction; (2) rote memorization emphasis; (3) teachers reading to students without engaging them in conversation; and (4) a correctness emphasis in children’s writing. Then Stipek sought to see what factors would predict which approach to instruction students would likely receive in their classrooms. Of note is that *the only factor that significantly predicted the use of didactic teaching in a given school was the percentage of Black students in that school.*

These findings have been replicated in smaller scales in more recent studies. The results taken together indicate that, for whatever reason, all too many young Black students are not getting substantial access to high-quality instruction in our nation’s schools.

Overall, the evidence that has accumulated in recent years strongly suggests that approaches to classroom teaching and learning that emanate from a human capacity building position have great heuristic value in closing achievement gaps while moving virtually all students to the higher levels of academic outcomes that our society will require of them in the years and decades ahead. Yet there still exists a persistent, more widely subscribed to stance of benevolent pathology, presented as a well-intentioned way to help those groups of students who lag behind academically because of their unfortunate life experiences outside of school. According to this more prevalent position, the deficits these students accrue are said to lead to certain ways of being or doing in school settings that hinder their academic success. It follows that such “disadvantaged” children and youth must emulate the ways of more “advantaged” students in order to succeed. Providing such opportunities becomes the crux of often well-intentioned interventions. Yet given also that the prevailing devices and processes of schooling still largely support a talent identification and sorting function, then as some students succeed, many more are “required” to fail or at least be deemed mediocre or average at best. And against the backdrop of privilege and entitlement, those students still likely to be most successful will come from groups who have enjoyed such favored status in the past and who will seek to perpetuate such status in the future. In the meantime, the continued failure of “disadvantaged” students in the face of these well-intentioned efforts to raise their achievement further cements existing disparities in privilege and entitlement in our social order. Moreover, when such well-intentioned approaches fall short of widely lifting achievement levels of “disadvantaged” children, it leads to another byproduct: *the normalization of failure* (Noguera and Wing, 2006).

When Black children fail in school, so often there are no raised eyebrows, there is little outrage and there is no handwringing. It is expected and it is normal. Yet when especially poor Black children do well in school, it is met with surprise. It is seen as almost miraculous. Books are written about their achievements against the odds. And many of these “successful” students come to see themselves as abnormal, freaks, even outcasts, castigated by their peers. This is a national tragedy. Yet if we follow different concepts and paths and examine the evidence at our disposal, it certainly does not have to be this way.

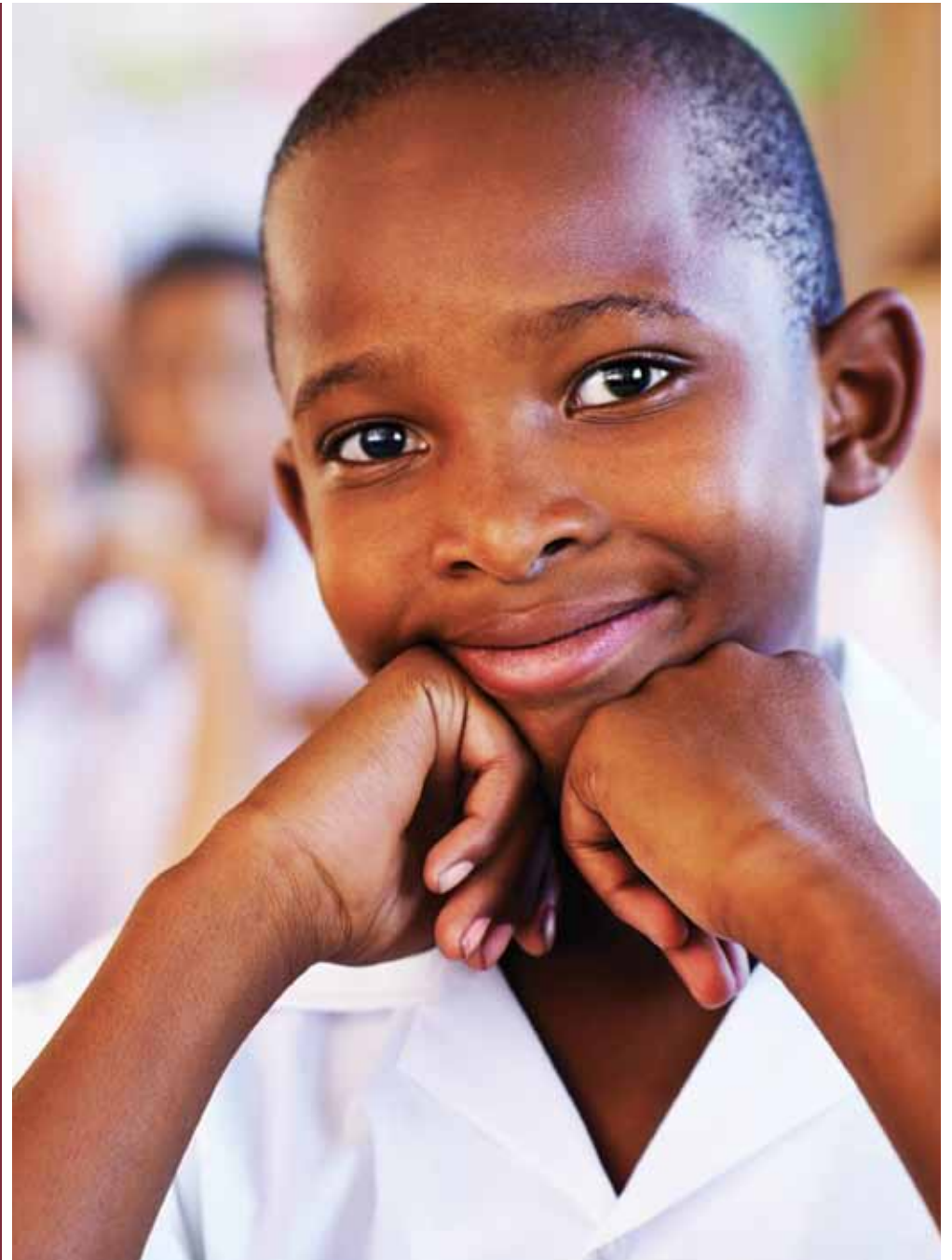
THE BLACK FAMILY: RE-IMAGINING FAMILY SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

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There is no shortage of reports, briefs, studies or statistics about the state of the young Black child in America. In particular, we hear about the persistent achievement gap supported by data indicating that the gap begins prior to school, especially for young Black boys. There are many reasons for the achievement gap, and many intertwined solutions. One of the most prominent suggestions is to focus not on the achievement gap itself, but on the opportunity gap that exists for Black children and their families. However, this gap is deeply entrenched in the social, political and historical contexts of the lives of Black families and children since the enslavement period. Research is clear that parenting and family processes provide an avenue for successfully addressing the gap experienced by Black children, yet it is critical that we ask how parents are supported in ways that are culturally relevant and strengths based.

The purpose of this brief is to re-imagine what it means for schools and early childhood education programs to support and engage with families, especially families with young children living in poverty. This re-imagining requires a strengths-based perspective that acknowledges the complex lives and history of Black families as they continue to strive for success, even in the midst of many barriers including social and institutional racism, prejudice and limited opportunities.



RE-IMAGINE WHAT IT MEANS FOR SCHOOLS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT AND ENGAGE WITH FAMILIES, ESPECIALLY FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY.

STRENGTHS OF BLACK FAMILIES

Numerous studies point to the key and critical role of families in the success and achievement of young children before and after birth (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005; Joe & Davis, 2009). Families, broadly defined, tend to be permanent fixtures in children's lives, particularly when compared to pre-schools and teachers. The contributions of families go well beyond meeting the basic needs of children—food, shelter and health care. Families, particularly parents, and especially mothers, serve the primary role of being children's first attachment figures. A secure attachment between children and their parents during the early years provides a foundation for children to explore and interact with their environment and others under uncertainty (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1988), which is an important transactional process in children's development and success (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). With this foundational research about the significance of parents in the early years, there has been a recent resurgence on supporting positive parenting, particularly parents' responsiveness, sensitivity and provision of cognitive stimulation, as well as enhancing their *intentional and proactive* engagement in their children's learning and development. This focus is exemplified by such disparate efforts as the family engagement framework developed by Head Start and the emphasis on allowing for parental choice for schools. The challenge that remains is whether and how these new frameworks will address the existing achievement gap, and, importantly, the opportunity gap that develops as early as 9 months of age, especially for Black males (Aratani, Wight, & Cooper, 2011).

There are universal aspects of parenting that have been noted as beneficial for all children, regardless of income and ethnicity (Bradley et al., 2001; Mistry et al., 2002). These processes include sensitive and nurturing parenting and provisions for an enriching environment. In essence, when parents are responsive and sensitive to children's needs and provide a variety of enriching opportunities (e.g., reading and talking, engaging in imaginative play, and visiting parks and museums), then children's sense of autonomy and confidence in their skills and abilities are enhanced, strengthening their ability to deal with novel stimuli (e.g., learning to read) and overcome obstacles (e.g., insensitive teachers) (Pungello et al., 2009).

Yet parenting is also culturally based, so more attention is needed to understand and positively respond to and incorporate specific practices and beliefs that are unique to minority families, especially Black families, whose children are disproportionately represented across negative education, health and development measures. Recent studies have begun to question whether the framework of parenting is equivalent and meaningful across ethnic groups (Iruka, LaForett, & Odom, 2012). For instance, are Black parents who are viewed as more "controlling and intrusive" compared to White parents really that way and, further, is their parenting perceived by children in the same way? Do parent-child activities mean the same thing for White and Black children when the questions focus on middle-class Eurocentric beliefs of what is good parenting? Should these perspectives also take into account other activities that minority parents may engage in with their children, such as going to church, engaging in oral storytelling, and attending cultural events? How are measures of "family engagement" around cultural socialization efforts taken into account?

Cultural socialization includes "parental practices that teach children about their racial or ethnic heritage and history; promote cultural customs and traditions; and promote children's cultural, racial, and ethnic pride, either deliberately or implicitly" (Hughes et al., 2006). In the case of Blacks, who have faced and continue to face prejudice and discrimination, this means that parents have to instill pride in their culture and history to combat the negative images and perceptions about their cultural group. Depending on the child's age and competence, parents may socialize children about their culture through discussions about important historical and cultural figures; traditions and celebrations; exposure to culturally relevant books, music, art and stories; eating of ethnic foods; and use of family home language or dialect. So beyond the universal practices that Black parents engage in, there are other culturally meaningful parenting activities they also engage in that remain hidden when researchers tend to discuss key parental practices that are beneficial for children.

16% OF BLACK CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 5 ARE FOREIGN BORN OR HAVE AT LEAST ONE FOREIGN-BORN PARENT AND REPRESENT A RAPIDLY GROWING SEGMENT OF THE U.S. POPULATION

DEMOGRAPHICS OF BLACK FAMILIES

As we delve deeper into culturally relevant practices, we need to look at the variety of cultures that make up “the Black family,” which is neither homogeneous nor monolithic. In fact, the demographics regarding “who is Black” has changed in the past couple of decades to include children of immigrant families from countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and South America. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, approximately 16% of Black children under the age of 5 are foreign born or have at least one foreign-born parent and represent a rapidly growing segment of the US population (the African immigrant population alone rose by 63% from 2000 to 2008). Yet despite these demographic changes, children in Black immigrant families remain neglected by research studies and national discourse on immigration. As shown in Table 1, Black families also vary in their educational attainment, structure and poverty status.

Considering the complexity of parenting in general, which is further complicated by poverty, low educational attainment and the trappings of disadvantaged communities that Black families are more likely to experience, the social, historical, economic and cultural contexts of Black families need to be considered when seeking out family support and engagement practices and policies that are most critical and beneficial for the family system. Throughout our recent history, systematic laws and rules have been set up to disenfranchise Black individuals and families, from the Jim Crow laws to educational institutions segregated by policy and by practice. Discriminatory and predatory practices have infiltrated financial institutions as well, such that even when Black families have the resources and assets to generate wealth and positive child outcomes, such as homeownership, income, employment, college education and inheritance, the returns to those families are less compared to White families (Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013). In addition, ongoing financial woes and deep budget cuts are having increasingly deleterious effects on the economic health of families, which impacts the well-being and stability of the family, and subsequently their parenting processes and practices.

Table 1. Black Family Demographics

EDUCATION ATTAINMENT (PERCENT)		FAMILY ARRANGEMENT (PERCENT)		POVERTY STATUS (PERCENT)	
LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL	15.5	TWO-PARENT ARRANGEMENT	38.1	BELOW 100% POVERTY	26
HIGH SCHOOL/GED	34.8	ONE-PARENT ARRANGEMENT	55.2	AT OR ABOVE 100% POVERTY	74
SOME COLLEGE	29.8	NO PARENT ARRANGEMENT	6.7		
COLLEGE DEGREE AND/OR HIGHER	19.9				

SOURCE. U.S. CENSUS 2010, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY, ANNUAL SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SUPPLEMENT, 2010



PARADIGM SHIFT: CULTURALLY RELEVANT FAMILY SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

Rather than viewing Black families as deficient or parents as “uncaring, dysfunctional, unsupportive and... as obstacles in the way of progress and problems to be overcome,” (Noguera, 2008) it is critical for programs seeking to be more effective in supporting and engaging Black families to change their frame towards cultural relevance and consider the **4Es—Exploration, Expectation, Education and Empowerment**.

EXPLORATION

Black families have a rich set of resources and skills that demand to be explored and valued in family support and engagement programming. There is a rich history of spirituality, collectivism and “stick-to-it-iveness” in Black families. There are also meaningful cultural adaptations that result from a history of disenfranchisement in the U.S. and deep-seated qualities from our African roots, such as flexible use of language, innovation and exemplary artistic and athletic prowess. These culturally-based practices and resources, also coined as “funds of knowledge,” need to be identified and integrated into the experiences of young children, as well as used as resources in bringing and integrating new information into children’s learning. The term *Funds of Knowledge* (FoK) is an anthropologic term first coined by Wolf in 1966 to “to define resources and knowledge that households manipulate to make ends meet in the household economy (Hogg, 2011). Researchers from the University of Arizona recognized the importance of this concept in school settings for immigrant children. Moll and Greenberg (1990) defined FoK as “the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive.” If these “FoKs” are respected by educators, families can then contribute resources to help them “draw on student experiences and priorities in schooling, thus validating student knowledge and life values, and enabling them to scaffold student learning from the familiar” (Hogg, 2011).

Practice. One can identify families’ FoKs through multiple approaches, including home visits or other opportunities that lead to conversations about and observations of families’ routines and rituals. It is critical to approach families without judgment –and without extensive forms for them to complete–so that the focus of the discussion can be about the many ways in which families can support their children’s learning, success, unique talents and contributions. To elicit the FoK of families, educators must be careful not to diminish the various activities, skills and routines in which families engage, no matter how different they may be from their own. Educators should instead consider how what they learn may shape their perception of the child and family, as well as how their new knowledge could be integrated into classroom instruction, program activities and events.

EXPECTATIONS

Low expectations have been cited as a major contributing factor to the gap found between Black children and others, because they undermine children's sense of competency and increase their learned helplessness (McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Similarly, educators often hold low expectations for Black families' engagement, especially low-income Black parents, at least as it concerns school-based activities (e.g., class visits, volunteering and parent-teacher conferences). Barriers often cited for the lack of parent engagement are time, availability, one-parent households, stress, transportation and child care. While real enough, these barriers are often used punitively to reinforce the expectations of limited parent involvement, which in turn leads to more limited involvement. It is also a deficit view that simultaneously devalues parent engagement in the home and community while minimizing the powerful statement that "parents are their children's first teacher." To turn this model on its head requires that schools and teachers create a culture in which parents are expected to be *intentionally and proactively* engaged in their child's learning and school experiences. This only happens by building on Black families' FoKs and providing mechanisms for engagement that are more responsive to the contexts and benefits for these families. It requires, for example, that schools assess the value of having parents coming into the school for less-than-meaningful activities, and exploring alternative opportunities that support social networks and leadership roles.

Practice. In more intentionally and proactively engaging families, program should look to FoKs to unearth the skills and assets of parents and families. In addition to initial home visits, schools can support targeted surveys, interviews or focus groups to help them better understand how they can build upon parents' goals to encourage and support their engagement using the parents' preferred methods. Programs should seek not to "excuse" parents and families from being engaged, but rather find ways to help parents and families meet the expectations of involvement. Schools may find that, in order for parents to be fully engaged, they have to feel that they are making a difference in ways that make them valued partners and contributors. This perspective may lead to opportunities to invite parents to develop classroom lessons and activities based on their skills and talents; form parent-buddy or mentor programs; hold events at varying times and in alternative locations; and encourage parents to take on leadership roles in initiatives that schools may not be able to prioritize on their own, such as father-child engagement programs.

EDUCATION

Families are deeply knowledgeable about their children's strengths and weaknesses, and, with the right resources and supports in place, they are in the best position to meet their children's needs. Due, however, to the history of disenfranchisement of Black families in participating in high-quality educational systems, it is important that parents are educated on how to navigate the complex institutions and systems they are likely to encounter for the benefit of their children. Educating parents about how to successfully navigate systems helps to ensure that they appropriately advocate for their children, from choosing a preschool that meets their child's needs to deciding whether to test for gifted and talented programs to seeking support for special needs.

Practice. Early childhood education programs and schools often engage in partnerships with a variety of community and local agencies that, together, can help share information, support advocacy and promote access to resources and networks. Shared data systems and other ongoing communication can help to ensure that families seeking information and support are connected not only to appropriate services and resources, but also to each other, which helps to build critically important social capital and networks. These connective efforts should be enhanced by teachers who can facilitate specific relationships between families based on their FoKs. For example, where one parent is known to have skills navigating special education services on behalf of her child, she might be able to support another parent seeking assistance and advice on navigating a similar system for his child.

EMPOWERMENT

The crux of all family support and engagement programming should be to empower families to be self-sufficient and appropriately equipped to deal with the challenges of parenting and life obstacles. Family support programs identified as being the most effective for families and children focus on providing the families with the tools to achieve their goals as opposed to doing it for the family (Avellar et al., 2012). Home visiting programs, including the Nurse-Family Partnership, have made it a priority to focus on empowering families within their life contexts and cultural environments, ensuring that the skills they develop are transferable, create a sense of self-agency, and promote self-control.

Practice. Empowering families is a process of building self-competence and self-sufficiency that requires programs to explore families' assets and capacities, educate them on issues around advocacy and networking, and hold high expectation about their role as parents in all aspects of their child's development. Empowering families does not mean "doing it" for the family—which may be

easier and more productive in the short run, but increasingly harmful in the long term. If, for example, a parent is seeking more information about attaining a college degree, the program or school should not simply call the nearest university. Instead, they can provide contact information for various colleges, help the individual understand the information, ensure they have support in navigating the system and connect them with other parents who may have themselves recently gone through a similar process. When considering how to structure parent events and activities, programs and schools may also want to think about (1) providing education and resources that match with goals the parents have identified; (2) identifying different ways to share information using a diverse range of communication methods; (3) providing opportunities for parents to be heard and listened to, whether at meetings with important community or school figures or through one-on-one conversations; and (4) celebrating the smaller successes achieved in the face of multiple challenges, such as opportunities to recognize parents attending their first parent meetings or supporting family members making progress learning a new language.

IMPLICATIONS

This re-imagining of family support and engagement to meet the needs and strengths of African American families will require adjustments in practices, policies and research, including the following recommendations:

- **Practices.** Programs and schools will need to focus on expanding the traditional, one-way, directional approach of “family engagement” to a more authentic bi-directional approach that sees families as valuable to the process of educating children, both because of their fundamental importance and because their meaningful engagement matters in achieving current measures of accountability and success. Leaders and educators will also need to ensure that their practices are culturally relevant, reflective of families’ race and ethnicity as well as their economic and social conditions. This could lead not only to a focus on parent engagement in school-based programming, but also a focus on supporting engagement and empowerment in the home and community. Cultural competence is not, of course, mastered through one-day trainings, nor is it an added programmatic component. It needs, rather, to be integrated into all aspects of professional development, curriculum, assessment and evaluation. It is a developmental process ranging from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency that requires proactiveness, intentionality and authenticity.
- **Policy.** Policies about family engagement are written and implemented as a one-size-fits-all approach that offers limited attention to the culture and contexts of families. Furthermore, professionals who are expected to

support families are themselves provided with limited resources, support and guidance. This sends a message that “family support” is simple, uncomplicated and non-essential compared to other program elements. In line with this re-imagining, policies and accompanying funding and implementation resources need to be better aligned to support the truism that “parents are children’s first teachers.” Supporting this principle is a key aspect of high-quality early care and education programs, extending through the early grades.

- **Research.** Studies and interventions are often conducted based on middle-class Eurocentric values and beliefs. The examination and evaluation of parenting practices and family processes tend to be based on these traditional views, with little focus on cultural differences, as well as the varying contexts of minority families and children. Researchers need to examine the historical contexts of certain assumptions about parenting practices and supports that are needed, especially in light of changing demographics. In addition, resources must support research unpacking what it means to be Black in America, which would likely require new theoretical and methodological approaches and the engagement of diverse researchers, practitioners and community agents. There is a need for new research, including new questions and measurements, which examine what is needed to effectively and successfully support and engage Black families. These new vantage points should consider their unique social, cultural and historical contexts and perspectives that shape their lives and hence their children’s lives and development.

CONCLUSION

The Black family is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. As a means to addressing the achievement and opportunity gaps that persist in the U.S. with Black children, it is important that in addition to addressing the academic and social-emotional needs of children, the role of the family must be authentically acknowledged and valued. This would require examining the social, political and historical contexts of families’ lives. Black families have many resources that are valuable to children’s learning and development. However, more attention and intention is needed to incorporate these resources into children’s early care and education experiences. The *4Es* is a beginning framework that can be used to harness the strengths of Black families with the goal of improving their lives. Addressing the opportunity gap for young Black children cannot happen without their families and communities as a critical element of the solution.

19%

OF BLACK, NON-HISPANIC CHILDREN AGES 0-18 LIVE IN MARRIED COUPLE FAMILIES (EITHER WITH BOTH PARENTS OR ONE PARENT AND A STEP-PARENT)¹⁴

POINT OF PROOF:

FLAMBOYAN FOUNDATION FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PARTNERSHIP

WASHINGTON, DC

Flamboyan Foundation aims to transform the way families and educators work together on behalf of students. Although family members can be involved in their child's education in various ways—from fundraising for their child's school to checking their child's homework—research suggests specific roles matter most for student achievement:

- 1) **Having high expectations and reinforcing the value of education with their child**
- 2) **Monitoring their child's performance and holding their child accountable**
- 3) **Supporting their child's learning**
- 4) **Guiding their child's education to ensure the child is on track for college or career**
- 5) **Advocating for their child to receive an excellent education**

In order for schools to help families play these roles, Flamboyan Foundation supports Family Engagement Partner Schools to:

- **Build trusting relationships between teachers and families and create welcoming school environments**
 - Partner schools learn and implement strategies, including Parent-Teacher Home Visits and ongoing positive communications
 - Through these strategies, teachers tap parents' expertise, learning about students' interests, past experiences in school, and families' specific situations; hear about parents' hopes and dreams for their child; and invite parents to articulate expectations of teachers.
- **Engage families as partners in their students' academic success**
 - Once the foundation of mutually respectful relationships is in place, schools provide the information and support families need to improve their child's educational outcomes.
 - Schools improve their existing parent-teacher conferences, and/or pilot a new model of parent teacher conferences called Academic Parent-Teacher Teams (APTT).
 - APTT provides parents with real-time data on their student's academic performance. This data is coupled with a parent/teacher determined goal for improvement, as well as activities parents can do at home to support their child's skill development. Teachers and parents communicate throughout the year to track their student's progress towards the goal.

33%

OF BLACK, NON-HISPANIC CHILDREN LIVE IN TWO-PARENT FAMILIES WHERE THE PARENTS ARE COHABITATING¹⁵

79%

OF BLACK CHILDREN AGES 3-5 ARE READ TO BY A FAMILY MEMBER THREE OR MORE TIMES PER WEEK. 54% OF BLACK CHILDREN ARE TOLD A STORY BY A PARENT OR FAMILY MEMBER¹⁷

46%

OF BLACK, NON-HISPANIC CHILDREN LIVE WITH A SINGLE PARENT¹⁶

WHEN TEACHERS EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE FAMILIES, SCHOOLS WILL SEE BETTER OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS.

WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”

Flamboyant Foundation’s Family Engagement Partnership (FEP) builds the capacity of predominately African American urban public schools to design and execute family engagement strategies that empower families to fulfill the roles critical to student success. We define family engagement as the collaboration between families and schools that drives student learning.

Specifically, Flamboyant Foundation believes effective family engagement is: embedded in the core instructional program of the school; individualized for each student and family; a shared responsibility between families and school staff, with particularly important roles for teachers; and built on a strong foundation of trusting relationships between families and school staff.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?

Flamboyant Foundation partners with 24 schools in the District of Columbia. Our cohort includes schools from every ward in the District. Student populations across our partner schools include, on average, 87% students who receive free and reduced meals, 64% African American students, and 28% Latino students.

MORE BLACK CHILDREN HAVE MOTHERS WITH A BACHELOR’S DEGREE THAN MOTHERS WITH LESS THAN A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA.

13% OF MOTHERS OF BLACK CHILDREN AGES 6-18 HAVE LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION

17% OF MOTHERS OF BLACK CHILDREN AGES 6-18 HAVE A BACHELOR’S DEGREE¹⁸

HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

Year 1 Outcomes:

- ✓ Families communicate high expectations, monitor progress and support learning at home
- ✓ Families feel increased confidence and satisfaction in their school
- ✓ Teachers have higher expectations and improve their instruction
- ✓ Teachers feel more supported and experience greater job satisfaction

Year 2 Outcomes:

- ✓ Student achievement increases
- ✓ School culture improves

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

We have a strong relationship with the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and our charter partners and, as a result, have worked with them to track school-level indicators of progress. While we are still undergoing a formal evaluation, these indicators show us our work is likely helping schools in a number of ways:

From 2010-2011 to 2011-2012, partner schools experienced, on average:

- ✓ 2% increase in average daily attendance
- ✓ 80% decrease in short-term suspensions
- ✓ 3% increase in average DC-CAS scores

From 2011-2012 to 2012-2013, partner schools experienced, on average:

- ✓ 1% increase in in-seat attendance
- ✓ 43% decrease in number of truant students
- ✓ 35% decrease in short-term suspensions

We also anticipate having formal evaluation results for the Family Engagement Partnership, provided by Johns Hopkins University, in late fall, 2013.

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

While many school-based family engagement efforts often “outsource” family engagement to a parent liaison, social worker or external partner, the FEP is predicated on the belief that classroom teachers are best positioned to equip

28% OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE WAITING ON ADOPTION ARE BLACK¹⁹

parents with the confidence, skills and knowledge to support their child's engagement and achievement in school. As such, the FEP leverages teachers as the primary mediators of family engagement. This approach not only increases the potential for impact, but, by changing teacher practice, also offers a sustainable model for the field.

The Family Engagement Partnership has many strengths:

- ✓ **Focus on results.** We have chosen family engagement strategies we think are most likely to achieve impacts for students. This focus has helped us find partner schools that share a similarly relentless and student-centered approach to their work.
- ✓ **Learning culture.** We model for our partner schools a process for continuous improvement and are always asking how we could work smarter and more effectively. We are nimble and adapt to new information or ideas.
- ✓ **Staffing.** Flamboyant Foundation's coaches are well-respected, organized, and all have classroom/leadership experience. As such, they provide timely, relevant and pragmatic advice and support to partner school principals and teachers.
- ✓ **Teacher and parent voice.** This work is a heavy lift for teachers and, as such, we need to honor their perspectives and leverage their expertise. We do this by asking principals to involve teacher leads in the partnership (and providing a stipend to support their time) and by having teachers and parents facilitate trainings and learning for their peers across the partnership.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

While we have not experienced any major disappointments to date, we have had a few school-specific challenges that prevent us from achieving expected results in those schools due to principals with competing priorities.

Collectively, these challenges have prompted a number of shifts in strategy:

- ✓ **Explicit leadership actions.** We have created a new Theory of Change that lays out how the principal successfully manages the Family Engagement Partnership ("inputs"). These inputs are:
 - family engagement vision and prioritization;
 - effective delegation and shared leadership;
 - monitoring implementation and holding staff accountable;
 - staff investment;
 - coaching, support and professional development; and
 - organizational and business administration systems.

We are creating a Leadership Rubric aligned to these inputs that will lay out stages of development for partner schools. This will enable Flamboyant to target coaching and support to areas of need, as well as more effectively differentiate our support to partner schools.

- ✓ **Revised partnership selection process.** This year, we screened for school partners who are capable of overseeing this work. We have also tightened our criteria for the 2013-2014 school year to identify partner schools based on the principal's ability to prioritize family engagement as a school improvement focus and his/her ability to manage any school improvement/change effort (aligned to the Theory of Change inputs).

HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

With full costs at approximately \$50,000 per school, the Family Engagement Partnership costs just under \$200 per student. Flamboyant Foundation supports partner schools by funding associated costs and providing robust coaching. To allow us to serve more schools, we have developed a sustainability model for the Family Engagement Partnership that includes schools' contributing to its total cost at increasing amounts over three years. We are also actively pursuing public dollars and other strategic partnerships to spread and sustain the work in Washington, DC.

77% OF ALL BLACK CHILDREN AGES 0-8 HAVE AT LEAST ONE PARENT IN THE LABOR FORCE (COMPARED TO 88% FOR CHILDREN AGES 0-8 OF ALL RACES)²⁰

MULTIPLE STRATEGIES MUST BE EMPLOYED TO ASSURE A MEANINGFUL EARLY EDUCATION FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN, STRATEGIES THAT TRULY RAISE THE BAR FOR SUCCESS AND EQUALIZE THE EDUCATIONAL PLAYING FIELD

SIGNIFICANT–BUT NOT SUFFICIENT: QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS

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That high quality early childhood education is of great value to both participating individuals and to society at large is now beyond question. Research has shown that societal benefits alone include reductions in grade retention, special education placement, high school dropout rates and juvenile crime, as well as increases in educational attainment, employability and taxes paid (Schweinhart et al., 2004). Yet the benefits of even the most high-quality early education programs must not be overstated. In an early report of one of the flagship longitudinal studies of preschool effects, the High Scope Foundation's Perry Preschool Study (Berrueta-Clement et al, 1985), early results showed that the group that went to preschool scored one full grade level ahead of those who did not go to preschool at the end of 8th grade—a highly significant finding. What this meant, however—and what is much less well-known—was that the group that attended preschool was reading at a *5th-grade level* while the group that did not attend preschool was reading at a *4th-grade level*—neither of which should be acceptable at the end of 8th grade. This outcome clearly demonstrates that the results of high-quality early childhood education may be significant—but still not sufficient. Findings like these highlight the fact that multiple strategies must be employed to assure a meaningful early education for African American children, strategies that truly raise the bar for success and equalize the educational playing field.

FROM BRILLIANT BABY TO CHILD PLACED AT RISK

There is a line of research in child development that has received limited attention over the past 60 years. My colleague, the late Dr. Mary Rhodes Hoover, called it the “brilliant baby” research. This research documented the psychomotor precocity of infants of African descent beginning as early as the 1930s. In study after study, infants of African descent scored significantly higher than their non-African descent peers on measures of psychomotor development including head posture and crawling (Werner, 1972). As standardized measures become more focused on language development, however, the phenomenon now known as the “achievement gap” began to manifest itself as African American children reached the third year of life. More recently, early evidence of this disparity has been called the “30 Million Word Gap,” a reference to a study (with questionable generalizability based on its small sample size) that shows that low-income parents expose their children to significantly less language in the first three years of life (Hart & Risley, 1995). One result of this study has been to offer another way to lay guilt and blame for the persistent and pervasive achievement gap at the feet of poor, African American women who, in their collective failure to talk to their babies—and to talk to them in ways that approximate middle-class parenting—are responsible for later school failure.

It is extremely important, of course, to have positive early parent-child interactions. It is also a meaningful and worthwhile goal to develop interventions to support these interactions. However, the most effective interventions will consider context, both cultural and communal. For those raised in a world where “children should be seen and not heard,” finding the fine line between children who “talk” and children who “talk back” is difficult. In addition, it may be reasonable to remember that highly interactive, language-rich conversations are more difficult to come by in families overwhelmed by deep and persistent stressors who are trying, above all, to simply keep their children safe. Finally, while parents are their children's first and most important teachers—a role which comes with significant responsibility—we should balance that fact with the role played by early childhood programs and schools. We also need to remember that optimal child development is indeed a shared and collective responsibility.



“There are serious long-term effects of being labeled a ‘troublemaker’ that substantially increases one’s chances of ending up in jail. In the daily experience of being so named, regulated and surveyed, access to the full resources of the school are increasingly denied as the boys are isolated in non-academic spaces in school or banished to lounging at home or loitering in the streets...When removal from classroom life begins at an early age, it is even more devastating, as human possibilities are stunted at a crucial formative period of life.”

– Ann Arnett Ferguson
Bad Boys: Public Schools in the
Making of Black Masculinity (2000)

It should be noted here that longitudinal research on preschool effects has shown that the highest quality programs produce the most significant results (Frede, 1995). It should also be noted that many low-income, African American children are enrolled in preschool settings that are less likely to expose them to practices associated with social, emotional and academic gains (Locasale-Crouch et al., 2007). Indeed, as it currently exists, the education of young African American children, and boys in particular, at all levels, is a national disgrace. On virtually every standardized measure of achievement, African American boys score at the lowest levels. These include measures of school readiness, vocabulary development, early reading proficiency and achievement-related attitudes. African American boys continue to be disproportionately placed in special education (Townsend, 2000), overly represented among the nation's high school dropouts (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012), and incarcerated at higher rates in both juvenile and adult prisons (Wald & Losen, 2003). Unfortunately, it is a process that begins early, with young African American boys having the highest suspension and expulsion rates from preschools (Gilliam, 2005). In many cases, therefore, early childhood education programs are serving as the first link in the preschool to prison pipeline—a link that we have a responsibility to break.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS*

Perspectives on and attempts at defining “high quality” have focused on programs for young children in general, and not on what may be “high quality” for any specific group of children. It is a “one-size-fits-all” approach that suggests that what is good for “most” is best for each and every sub-group of children. For young African American boys, however, the unique historical and sociocultural forces that continue to place them at risk for school failure (and its consequences) require a more refined and “group specific” definition of “high quality” early childhood education. Thus, the following seven indicators of quality should be addressed when assessing and supporting educators engaged in providing early childhood, preschool and early elementary education to young African American boys:

- 1) The teacher should display a willingness to take responsibility for the learning of all the young African American boys in his or her classroom.
- 2) The teacher should hold high expectations for the success of young African American boys.
- 3) The teacher should display a willingness and capacity to highlight the assets of young African American boys.



THE PERCENTAGE OF BLACK CHILDREN ENROLLED IN PRESCHOOL IS **GROWING OVER TIME**, AND IS HIGHER THAN THE ENROLLMENT FOR WHITE CHILDREN.

BETWEEN 2001 AND 2005, THE PERCENTAGE OF BLACK CHILDREN ENROLLED IN PRESCHOOL INCREASED FROM

44% TO 53%

FOR ALL 3-YEAR-OLDS AND FROM 68% TO 75% FOR ALL 4-YEAR-OLDS. COMPARATIVELY, IN 2005, 44% OF WHITE 3-YEAR-OLDS WERE ENROLLED IN PRESCHOOL, AS WERE 69% OF ALL WHITE 4-YEAR-OLDS.²¹

4) The teacher should recognize and demonstrate his or her knowledge that warmth and control are dimensions of effective socialization for young African American boys.

5) The teacher should be willing to engage in a proactive racial socialization of young African American boys.

6) The teacher should be willing to engage young African American boys in early literacy activities that include individualization.

7) The teacher should recognize and allow for the fact that high levels of vigorous activity are good for young African American boys and rooted in their culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES AND POLICYMAKERS (ADAPTED FROM RASHID, 2009)

Communities and the policymakers that represent them must prioritize the provision of truly high-quality early childhood education to African American boys. Toward that objective, the following recommendations are suggested:

1) The status of young African American boys in early childhood settings must become a priority for varied segments of the African American community. Community based organizations, parent groups and religious communities will need to coalesce around the following question: "What is happening to young African American boys in preschools and the early elementary grades?" Policy forums and research-based seminars can serve as starting points for the development of action plans and programmatic initiatives.

2) Policymakers and politicians must advocate for a broad range of services in early childhood programs in high poverty communities. These services include expanding early literacy training for parents and preschool teachers, mental health consultation services for preschool and early elementary teachers, and professional development opportunities that focus on creating high quality programs that address the needs of African American boys.

3) Charter schools for African American boys (PreK-3) that focus on early literacy should be developed by non-profit organizations and community groups. These schools should partner with culturally competent university researchers to evaluate their effectiveness in promoting early literacy acquisition. Concerted efforts should be made to recruit African American males to teach in these schools.

4) Public schools must be encouraged to establish more all-male classrooms in the early elementary grades. As part of this initiative, curriculum materials that reflect the interests of young African American boys should be developed, field tested, implemented and evaluated.

5) Professional development opportunities for all teachers of young African American boys should be developed with a focus on asset-based education, learning style preferences and curriculum relevance. Organizations such as the National Black Child Development Institute and the National Alliance of Black School Educators should work closely with colleges and universities to develop distance learning opportunities that focus on African American child development.

6) Public awareness campaigns should be initiated that highlight problems and offer solutions related to young African American boys in preschool and early elementary settings. These campaigns should utilize various forms of traditional and social media and focus on issues such as teacher expectations and behaviors, curriculum relevance and the importance of parental involvement. African American celebrities and media personalities should be encouraged to participate in these campaigns.

7) There should be continued advocacy for the development of programs to recruit African American males into teaching in early childhood settings including scholarships, loan forgiveness and alternative certification programs. The stigma around men teaching young children must be confronted and eradicated.

CONCLUSION

Young African American boys are often placed at risk by the very nature of preschool and early childhood settings that should promote their development. Issues of teacher responsiveness, program quality and developmental appropriateness must be examined specifically as they relate to outcomes for young African American boys. We must incorporate demands for comprehensive early childhood programs that go beyond universal preschool to address the unique needs and strengths of African American boys. Continuing to ignore both their needs and their strengths will perpetuate a status quo that may provide us with significant results, but a long-term impact that is clearly not sufficient.

HEAD START AND EARLY HEAD START PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE, HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION AND SUPPORT SERVICES TO VULNERABLE YOUNG CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO KINDERGARTEN, PREGNANT WOMEN AND THEIR FAMILIES.

29% OF ALL HEAD START PARTICIPANTS (AGES 0-5 AND PREGNANT WOMEN) ARE BLACK²²

POINT OF PROOF:

SMART FROM THE START, INC.

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Smart from the Start (“Smart”) is a family support, community engagement and school readiness initiative whose mission is to prevent the achievement gap among children living in Boston’s lowest income, most underserved communities. Smart from the Start expands and strengthens early learning opportunities for children birth to age five, promotes parents’ role as their children’s first teachers, and builds neighborhood will, understanding, and capacity to support school readiness. Smart from the Start’s strengths-based approach reaches out to the city’s most vulnerable families and empowers them with the tools, resources and support they need to break cycles of generational poverty and chronic school underachievement.

WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”

Smart from the Start is an innovative, evidence-based program that’s a model for preventing the achievement gap. Our work is informed and driven by the latest research and data outlining and highlighting racial, economic and cultural inequities in education, social services, income, access and health care. Our team members have lived, studied and understand the inequities in the educational systems that lead to and perpetuate school underachievement and dropout, and the flaws in the social service systems that often result in families being disrespected and mistreated by the very systems that are

supposed to be there to help and support them. Many staff members, including the Executive Director, come from the communities and populations we are serving and have a deep and passionate understanding of, and commitment to, changing these systems. Having been in the same shoes as the “Smart” families, our team brings a unique perspective and unrivaled passion to the work, honoring and respecting the knowledge, strengths and expertise of the diverse communities we serve. We have developed our programming to create strong, powerful and informed families and communities to engage in a new, more empowered way forward that will help to level the playing field for our children. “Smart’s” strengths-based empowerment approach enables staff to connect on a deep level with children and families, and inspires them to set and achieve goals never imagined.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?

Smart from the Start targets, exclusively, the lowest income families with children ages birth to five, who are living in the most underserved communities in the city. The overwhelming majority of the children and families living in the neighborhoods targeted by Smart from the Start are facing seemingly insurmountable challenges. At the time of enrollment, most live in public or subsidized housing, or are homeless and their average family income is approximately \$7,000 annually. Seventy-seven percent of our families are unemployed; at least half do not have a high school diploma. The overwhelming majority of Smart families are from minority and new immigrant populations—primarily of African American, Caribbean and Latino decent. Despite incredible strengths and resiliencies, many of them struggle with issues such as extreme poverty, depression, substance abuse, immigration and legal issues, domestic and community violence, teen parenthood and more.

Also, based on our independent evaluation, many of our parents and caregivers have experienced tragedy and trauma throughout their lifespan, beginning in their childhoods, and as a result, are now parenting while dealing with multiple challenges, in addition to trying to make due with inadequate resources.

25%

OF ALL EARLY HEAD START PARTICIPANTS ARE BLACK²³

CHILD CARE SUBSIDIES MAKE QUALITY CHILD CARE MORE AFFORDABLE, SUPPORT THE HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN, AND HELP LOW-INCOME PARENTS ACCESS THE CHILD CARE THEY NEED TO GO TO WORK OR TO SCHOOL TO SUPPORT THEIR FAMILIES.

44%

OF ALL CHILD CARE SUBSIDY RECIPIENTS ARE BLACK²⁴

24%

OF BLACK CHILDREN AT AGE 2 ARE ENROLLED IN CENTER-BASED CARE, COMPARED TO 16% OF ALL CHILDREN²⁵

62%

OF BLACK CHILDREN AT AGE 4 ARE ENROLLED IN CENTER-BASED CARE, COMPARED TO 57% OF ALL CHILDREN²⁶



HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

Smart envisions a world where every young child feels safe, secure and loved, and has his or her basic needs for healthy food, warm clothing, secure housing and safe neighborhoods met. We work toward a day where all children, regardless of who their parents are or where they live, have access to high quality, fun, enriching education that honors and celebrates their diversity, and prepares them to fulfill their greatest potential and to realize their dreams. To bring our vision into fruition, we have established the following outcomes:

- ✓ All “Smart” children entering kindergarten are assessed and determined to be “school-ready” with all services and supports in place;
- ✓ Parents and caregivers gain a deeper understanding of child development and use what they have learned to create better relationships with their children and positive home learning environments;
- ✓ A greater number of parents and caregivers earn their GED and enroll in higher education or training;
- ✓ Parents and caregivers are able to increase their income and self-sufficiency;
- ✓ Families seek mental and physical health services, achieving reduced health disparities in the community;
- ✓ Families gain and use advocacy skills to better support their children and to take leadership roles in their communities to support others;
- ✓ Communities come together, committed to improving conditions for young children and finding new ways to encourage and support them.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

After just five years, Smart from the Start has experienced rapid growth with qualitative and quantitative evidence demonstrating remarkable outcomes; indeed, we have earned the Boston-based Root Cause’s “2011 Social Innovator of the Year” Award. We have consistently invested in high quality, independent evaluation of our programs and their impacts on the children, families and communities we serve. The studies included quantitative and qualitative assessments focused on Smart’s impact on children’s development, as well as our impact on parenting and on family and caregiver functioning. We also collected data on the level of stress and trauma our families have experienced, all in an effort to gauge our efficacy as well as to inform programming and planning. On the ASQ school readiness assessment, for example, our five year olds scored: 100% in Communication, 100% on Problem Solving, 100% on Personal and Social Skills, 94% on Gross Motor, 74% on Fine Motor.

What makes this data even more impressive are the results of the trauma study administered on Smart families in 2012. This data shows that the families we serve are not only living in extreme poverty and lack educational opportunities, but that they are also living with staggering levels of trauma and toxic stress. The average number of lifetime traumatic events experienced by surveyed parents was 9.6 events per caregiver. Events included childhood sexual abuse, partner violence, and witnessing a shooting or stabbing, among others. These caregivers are crediting Smart from the Start with helping them address their painful past issues, and with giving them the support and encouragement they need to do better by their young children, as well as hope for their futures.

A HIGHER PERCENTAGE OF BLACK CHILDREN AGES 3-6 ARE ABLE TO READ WORDS IN A BOOK, COMPARED TO CHILDREN OF ALL OTHER RACES (16% OF BLACK CHILDREN, COMPARED TO 8% OF WHITE CHILDREN, 3% OF HISPANIC CHILDREN AND 8% OF ASIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER CHILDREN)

38% OF BLACK CHILDREN AGES 3-6 RECOGNIZE ALL LETTERS OF THE ALPHABET, COMPARED TO 36% OF WHITE CHILDREN, 15% OF HISPANIC CHILDREN AND 43% OF ASIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER CHILDREN

69% OF BLACK CHILDREN AGES 3-6 CAN COUNT TO 20 OR HIGHER, COMPARED TO 69% OF WHITE CHILDREN, 42% OF HISPANIC CHILDREN, AND 76% OF ASIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER CHILDREN²⁷

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

The same issues have plagued Boston’s low-income neighborhoods for generations. If we continue to do what we have always done, we will continue to get what we have always gotten—the same communities, with the same problems and children robbed of an opportunity to reach their greatest potential. This

We know that in order to effectively engage vulnerable communities and families you must first build relationships that reflect genuine honor, trust and respect.

is why Smart has adopted an innovative, grassroots approach to improving educational outcomes. Smart from the Start hires from the communities we serve. The staff of Smart from the Start has the unique perspective of having shared many of the struggles of the children and families we serve. We know that in order to effectively engage vulnerable communities and families you must first build relationships that reflect genuine honor, trust and respect.

We believe that we cannot address the needs of children in isolation from their families, and in turn cannot address the needs of families in isolation from their communities. If children are living in toxic homes and community environments with multiple stressors, they struggle to thrive. We have designed a unique, strengths-based model, informed by families and communities, which is based on developing and strengthening relationships. Our model is unique because it meets families where they are, and celebrates and builds upon their strengths, regardless of their challenges. Programming is family and community driven, ecological and holistic, and respects and celebrates the cultural diversity of our families. We recognize that in order to ensure long lasting and sustainable change for our children, we must address issues and invest in communities and families, in addition to promoting the healthy development of young children.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

Smart from the Start has experienced a period of rapid expansion and growth over the past five years. As we gain credibility on the ground, and earn the trust of families and communities, more and more families are seeking us out for programs, services and support. We are meeting new children every day. We have a “no waiting list” policy, and therefore the biggest challenge is meeting our commitment to serve every single child and family who comes through our door. In order to keep that promise, we must streamline systems, learn to be more efficient, increase our capacity and diversify our funding in order to expand services to meet the great demand.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

Smart has been working effectively in inner city Boston for five years. We began with three program sites, in three low-income neighborhoods. We now are serving families in seven neighborhoods and 17 program sites. The issues we address are not exclusive to Boston; cities struggle with achievement gaps greater than ours, and higher percentages of families struggling with the same challenges. Smart aims to inspire change on a broader level—we have learned many lessons and have built an evidence-based model that can be replicated to achieve that goal.

Like Boston, there are many cities, some with considerable resources, some without, with populations of children and families struggling with chronic poverty, school underachievement, and their resulting challenges. Smart from the Start has developed a plan for the pilot replication of the Smart program model in urban communities, using the same grassroots, family and community process that begins with developing relationships and assessing the strengths and challenges of communities. Programming must be customized to meet the unique circumstances of each neighborhood, and be developed in partnership with those with whom we will serve and potential partners.

Replication will only be successful after establishing partnerships with institutions, organizations, and individuals to inform our work, ensuring that we have a deep understanding of the unique needs of the communities. To that end, Smart develops local advisory committees comprised of families and partners. Together, we plan, problem-solve and seek the necessary in-kind support in the form of physical space for programming and funding to sustain programming. We hire staff from the communities and train them to facilitate programs and support other families.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

Smart from the Start's innovative model provides a unique opportunity to break cycles that have led to limited horizons and tragic outcomes for children in our communities. Frederick Douglas once said, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” Smart from the Start not only emphatically agrees, but has developed a unique, evidence-based model of outreach, collaboration, early education, and family and community support that helps build those strong children. We provide young children the opportunity to reach their greatest potential, while restoring the village it takes to raise them.

“What fuels my inventive spirit is what I see happening. But, what fuels me more is what I see that is not happening.”

– will.i.am

RE-IMAGINING TEACHER EDUCATION

IN SUPPORT OF BLACK CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

CECELIA ALVARADO
Assistant Professor
University of the District of Columbia

Teacher educators in community colleges, baccalaureate and graduate programs are critical gatekeepers of quality education for Black children in our country. And yet, there is currently no consensus among the faculty in these programs about what teachers of Black children need to know and the characteristics they should exhibit upon entering the teaching field or assuming the education, guidance and care of children from Black families. Nor is there even agreement that Black children need teachers with different knowledge, experiences or dispositions than do children of other backgrounds, races or cultures.

WHO ARE OUR TEACHER EDUCATION CANDIDATES? WHO SHOULD THEY BE?

In *The Teacher of 2030*, Barnett Berry (2011) states, “Most universities, while attracting more academically able candidates than in the past, still do not prepare teachers for teaching in high-needs schools.” Most educators would agree that the term “high needs” is generally used in reference to schools located in low-performing areas, often in the inner city, often serving low-income children of color. National data regarding achievement levels at all grade levels supports this perspective.

As a teacher educator for the past 31 years, I believe that it is essential for prospective teachers, in-service teachers and assistant teachers to be challenged to gain specific knowledge, develop critical skills and enhance essential dispositions that support children and families in “high needs” communities. Teachers in the 21st century need to be fully prepared to better develop Black children, support their families and see them as being part of “high potential” communities. This switch in mindset is a critical change in disposition that is needed at all levels of education, but certainly in those educators who are working directly with children and families in communities of color.

Some of these necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions may be embedded in daily life experiences in the Black community. Therefore, recruiting teacher candidates from Black communities is a logical mechanism for supporting Black children, while also helping us reach our nation’s workforce development goal of diversifying our teaching ranks and bringing them into closer ethnic alignment with the populations they are serving. This strategy is also consistent with the first recommendation for higher education in the 2006 California Tomorrow publication *Getting Ready for Quality: The Critical Importance of Developing and Supporting a Skilled Ethnically and Linguistically Diverse Early Childhood Workforce*, which provided a range of recommendations for higher education systems to build internal capacity and provide teachers with the skills to work effectively with increasingly diverse children and families. Ching (2013) also supports this need and cites data from competitive institutions that shows access to college is more stratified by race than by socioeconomic class. For example, the overrepresentation of Whites and the underrepresentation of Blacks and Latinos is widening.



WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BARRIERS TO ENHANCING OUR TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENT RANKS WITH STUDENTS OF COLOR?

While there are many challenges, one core issue often goes unrecognized as a barrier. The Praxis I tool is a nationally accepted measure of teacher candidate qualifications, but there are questions about whether this is also the best measure of teacher competence for those hoping to teach and serve in Black communities. According to Mikitovics (2002) and Wilson and Youngs (2005) “cut scores” on the Praxis PPST (Pre-Professional Skills Test) have not proven valid for separating students who succeed in teacher education programs from those who fail. Further, they found no correlation between students’ PPST scores and later teacher evaluations. Most disturbingly, they write that the “supply of minority teacher candidates appears to be negatively affected by the use of the PPST as a screening device.”

Clearly, the subject of standardized assessment of teacher candidates is complex but surely teacher education program performance evaluations, course content and course grades need to be strongly considered by schools and school districts in deciding which candidates will be interviewed for teaching positions. The issue, however, goes deeper. Even if we were able to use more applied measures of teacher education candidate performance as assessments of readiness for teaching, candidates from Black communities—who may ultimately be excellent teachers for Black students—may not score highly on these measures either.

At the University of the District of Columbia Community College, where the huge majority of our students are Black, 96% of entering students come to us with developmental needs in reading and math. These extraordinarily high percentages reflect the troubling academic proficiency levels of students of color compared to White students throughout the nation, as indicated in the NAEP scores in the following table.

2012 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Percentage of Proficiency

COMPETENCY AREA	WHITE	BLACK	LATINO
READING	56%	14%	22%
MATHEMATICS	56%	13%	22%

Teacher educators must confront the reality of these current statistics, even while so many work to change them. Given the students who are now coming through our doors, our approach to candidate selection and curricula must be re-imagined and reconstituted to meet the real, practical needs of the teachers who will be serving Black children and families—and we should begin by re-imagining the entrance and exit requirements and processes we use with teacher education candidates. In addition, if and when students enter our teacher education programs with developmental needs in key academic areas, having been failed by the same systems to which they are aspiring to return, we as teacher educators must be willing to take on the charge of creating mechanisms that support these students in filling in their educational gaps and raising their academic threshold. Only then will they be able to compete successfully in college and in job searches for teaching positions. Our ultimate goal should be educating the next generation in ways that many of our teacher candidates were not themselves educated.

WHAT KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND DISPOSITIONS ARE NEEDED TO TEACH BLACK CHILDREN AND TO SUPPORT THEIR FAMILIES?

Goodwin and Oyler (2008) from the Teachers College at Columbia University contend that teacher education structure and requirements are remarkably similar across institutions. They state, “Typically, teacher preparation programs encompass four components: (1) general or content knowledge; (2) the foundations of education; (3) professional knowledge and methods, and (4) field experience. For the purposes of discussion, if we accept the importance of these components, are there additional elements and experiences that ought to be a part of the re-imagined criteria for all teachers of Black children? I believe there *are* some essential knowledge, skills and dispositions that should be mandatory. In broad terms, that essential content encompasses but is not limited to the following items: the facilitation of positive racial identity development; knowledge and history of and involvement in specific communities where Black families reside; analysis of institutional racism and classism and its repercussions in our schools and in our field; and cultural responsiveness in teaching.

In order for these elements to become a part of our re-imagined teacher education course content and redesigned field experience criteria, and because for most teacher educators, this content was not a part of our own graduate courses and experiences, we must begin with our own preparation to teach this content—and there, the re-imagining has already begun.

MODELS OF TEACHER EDUCATOR FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

In early childhood education, there have been local, state and national efforts to outline this needed content. These efforts include defining these experiences, bringing teacher educators together to do the work of looking at the unique needs of students of color, redesigning courses, finding textbooks and resources that address the essential content, addressing higher education issues and barriers to change, as well as considering how faculty members’ backgrounds, histories and life circumstances have shaped their teaching perspectives and approaches. Some of these models include:

- ✓ **Early Childhood Education Curriculum Leadership Institute (ECECLI)** - California Community College teams sponsored by the Fund for Instructional Improvement of the California Community Colleges’ Chancellor’s Office (1998).

In 1996-97, 33 California Community College early childhood education faculty embarked upon a nine-month journey, exploring issues of race, class, culture and language as they relate to “...our students, our (teacher education) programs and ourselves.” At the beginning of the process, some faculty analyzed their situation as “sadly unprepared to respond to the pressing issues facing our students, the dynamics of our classrooms and departments, and of our own experiences living in this multi-lingual, multi-racial and class-divided society.” At the end of the institute, faculty reflected, “We took on some of the most painful, divisive, confusing and complex problems of our times...it is no surprise we came to an understanding that it was just a beginning. We left feeling more committed to action, more determined to find paths for change... feeling more connected and with a deeper appreciation of our differences as potential strengths.” (Alvarado & Olsen Edwards, 1998)

- ✓ **National Community College Teaching and Leadership Institute (NCCTLI)** - Community college teams from around the country, sponsored by the Wheelock College Institute for Leadership and Career Initiatives, The Culturally Relevant Anti-Bias Education Center at Pacific Oaks College and ACCESS, the American Association Degree Early Childhood Educators.

This collaborative worked to enhance the competence of early childhood faculty around issues of diversity, equity, institutional analysis and change. A description of the work of the 30 faculty from 22 community colleges who attended in 1999 could have easily been written in 2013. They said, “This is a

time in our history when little is more important to faculty who want to truly meet the needs of all students they teach. And little is more critical in terms of the content of our courses, if our students are to be effective and successful in their chosen profession, working with children and families in the 21st century."

One faculty member from an Ohio community college talked about the work she had done during the Institute experience. She said, "I have adopted new readings (replacing textbooks), created new videotapes with teachers in their centers in our community and have helped students/teachers view and understand the importance of their own teaching. We are developing protocols and reading strategies with the students... Critical pedagogy now pervades the development of assignments and assessments, with a new syllabus, though it does not (yet) document the new spirit of the work or the transformation that has occurred in my teaching and me."

✓ **National Higher Education Early Childhood Leadership Institute (NHEECLI)** – Two- and four-year faculty teams sponsored by the Wheelock College Institute for Leadership and Career Initiatives, with funding from the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative.

In 2001, building upon the work of the ECECLI and NCCTLI, the institute planners and facilitators decided it was important to craft an experience that brought together faculty from two- and four-year institutions in the same geographic area. These participants were given the task to work together as a team to think about, outline and begin the work they could do together and separately. So often, dialogue and work between community college and university faculty is rare, even where there is a direct transfer link or transition between their programs. Issues of status and respect for the unique perspectives and experiences of each type of faculty member (i.e., two- and four-year), courses of study, student needs and faculty competencies had to be the starting place for the work.

Once "guards" were let down and teams began to come together, the true work began. This work included unpacking the program policies, principles, goals and curricula (e.g., reviewing courses, texts, field experiences and requirements) and then analyzing them in the context of issues of race, class, culture and language. During the months in between the Institute sessions, the "revitalized" relationships between faculty team members blossomed and grew. Collaborations between two- and four-year institutions were formed, projects were initiated and changes were realized. For example,

faculty members revised courses, included revisions that incorporated issues of race, class, culture and language and established new field experience placements in communities of color. There was also substantial thought and work undertaken around the issue of mentoring faculty of color to move them into permanent positions in the institutions as retirements and other vacancies occurred.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A RE-IMAGINING PROCESS

As the Children's Defense Fund has immortalized in their acclaimed slogan, "The sea is so wide, and my boat is so small." In other words, there is so much to be done, and we can each hold but a piece of the vastness. Yet, if each of us takes one piece of the puzzle to analyze and we begin to individually and collectively re-imagine the work, others will follow and the transformation will grow. The key elements of this transformation need to include:

- **Looking at our teacher education student populations, identifying the gaps and barriers that keep those gaps in place, and designing and implementing strategies toward attaining a teaching force that ethnically reflects the communities it serves;**
- **Identifying essential knowledge, skills and dispositions that should be mandatory for all teachers and assistant teachers working with Black children and their families;**
- **Educating and re-educating ourselves as teacher educators who must lead this effort to re-imagine and recreate our teacher education programs to fully support quality education for all children.**

As teacher educators, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to look around us, in every community where children are listening to, interacting with and absorbing the vision of themselves and their families that their teachers (our students) hold and convey to them. If that vision is not consistent with the goal mandated by the 2008 report of the APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, which is *to ensure success, continued strength and resilience among African American children and youth*, we must, as a collective body, re-imagine it and, as will.i.am, suggests: "Make things real that once were ideas."

POINT OF PROOF: BORDER CROSSERS

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Border Crossers equips educators to be leaders of racial justice in their schools and communities. We are a national education equity nonprofit dedicated to closing the achievement gap by training educators in how to explore race and racism with elementary school students. We believe that if educators are prepared to have meaningful conversations about diversity, students will be better equipped to interrupt patterns of inequality and injustice in their own lives and thrive in a multicultural society. Through our interactive and creative method grounded in data and research, we provide professional development workshops, community organizing and educator resources.

WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A "POINT OF PROOF?"

Border Crossers' work demonstrates that when educators engage in racial justice initiatives, Black children thrive and succeed at higher levels in schools. Through a specific racial equity analysis and framework, our programs engage educators in dismantling their own internalized biases and challenge the deficit model approach to working with students of color that prevails in the culture of schools. We believe our country has inherited a fundamentally unjust education system that fails to provide for students of color, particularly Black boys. Our programs push against dominant "colorblind" pedagogies by training educators how to recognize and interrupt systems of racial inequity.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?

Because Border Crossers' programs were created specifically for educators, the vast majority of participants in this project are teachers. Administrators, parents, staff and teaching artists make up a small but significant portion of our audience. Participants work in public, charter and independent schools throughout New York City, as well as community organizations and other nonprofits. The teachers we train work with a variety of student populations.

HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

All of Border Crossers' work is focused on encouraging educators to have open conversations about race with their students, empowering those students to interrupt cycles of racism that they see in their own lives, and engaging whole school communities to make long term institutional changes within the New York City education system. However, when focusing on the needs of Black children, it isn't sufficient to only work inside of the school. While our citywide trainings and in-school workshops help to create an atmosphere of understanding within an educational setting, it is also imperative to work with outside organizations that also have a stake in the success of Black children's lives. For Border Crossers, long-term success includes establishing and maintaining a presence within schools (public, charter and independent), as well as community organizations that work within and around all of those institutions.

Through our current programs, Border Crossers has worked with 700 teachers from 95 schools, with a student reach of over 21,000 students. Our short-term goals consist of maintaining these relationships and capitalizing on them to continue developing robust programs, as well as building our support team both within and outside of the organization.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

Based on a four-pronged evaluation protocol, Border Crossers is able to track the impact of our programs on teacher effectiveness. Our method takes both qualitative and quantitative data and measures the impact on teacher preparedness and action in the classroom. Pre-workshop questionnaires are given as well as a series of evaluations weeks and months after participating. Educators have revealed a level of clarity around their personal biases and how it is reflected in their teaching, how the systems in which they teach and work affects their Black students, and how their own pedagogy changes after gaining new knowledge, skills and tools from our workshops.

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

Border Crossers' programs are designed to encourage all educators in thoughtful reflection and dialogue about the needs of Black children. By examining the nature of systems of oppression, educators gain a deeper understanding of the historical and institutional framework of racism. However, our success comes from a unique and creative method that provides multiple entry points into the conversation and guides educators beyond theory to application in everyday settings and practice.

All of our programs have the same structure, whether it is a two-hour workshop or a full, six-hour training. Each section is structured in a way that offers information, encourages dialogue and stresses the importance of self-reflection:

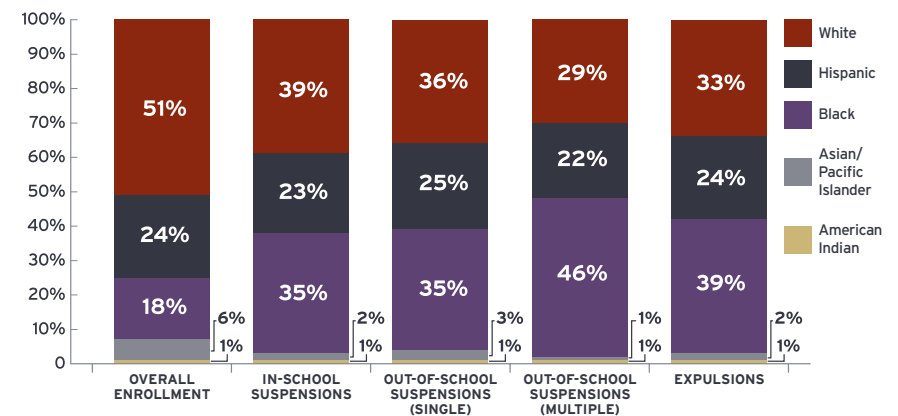
- ✓ **Foundations:** What is race? What is racism? This section deals with the theories behind race, racism, and how children come to learn about race.
- ✓ **Application:** What does the theory look like in reality? In this section, participants take a stand on when to talk about race with students, recognize the systems of power at play in their professional lives, and explore and dissect "teachable race moments," or moments having to do with race that give an educator pause.
- ✓ **Practice:** How can we intervene? After dissecting teachable moments in small groups, what do we say when we're confronted with racially charged comments from our students? Here, participants practice what they might say when a child asks a question about race through a structured activity called the One Voice Roleplay.

All of Border Crossers' workshops offer participants an opportunity to learn how race has shaped our country, how it has manifested itself with young people, and how to find creative ways to address it. One participant said, "The sensitivity to our community of teachers, their historical perspective on race and structural racism, and their three-pronged approach through foundation, application and practice, all combined to create workshops that were more than the usual uncomfortable, uneasy presentations."

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

Considering the enormous success of reaching 700 educators in the 2012-2013 school year, it is always a challenge when we are met with those who believe this work is not necessary, or that their school does not have a "race" problem. This is often a sign that some institutions do not see the larger picture of structural racism and its effects on our everyday lives. At Border Crossers, we see this as an opportunity to critically engage with schools and educators and share the importance of our work. We often utilize a community organizing strategy that classifies people into three groups—those who agree that this

Disparate Discipline Rates²⁸



African-American students represent 18% of students in the CRDC sample, but 35% of students suspended once, 46% of those suspended more than once, and 39% of students expelled.

work is necessary, those who are neutral and can be swayed to recognize the importance of our work, and those who push back against everything we do and have no interest in discussions about race, even with the current national climate on the issue. By working strategically to build a strong base, we leverage their power to build a critical mass in a school community that is committed to making institutional changes that benefit Black students.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

Border Crossers is sustained through foundation grants, individual contributions, a fee-for-service structure and government funding. We seek to operate within the realities of current funding models while keeping the interests and influence of the communities we serve at the heart of our mission and work.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

The most important takeaway of Border Crossers, particularly in relation to Black children, families and communities, is that we recognize the inequality that is at play within the institution of education. In New York City alone, 85% of teachers are White, and while only 30% of students are Black, this creates a unique challenge that contributes to the "achievement gap." It is vital that we address these inconsistencies and help educators respond to the ways in which race and racism has affected and continues to affect the lives and education of Black children.

WHEN STANDARDIZED TESTS MISS THE MARK:

A PERSONAL ESSAY

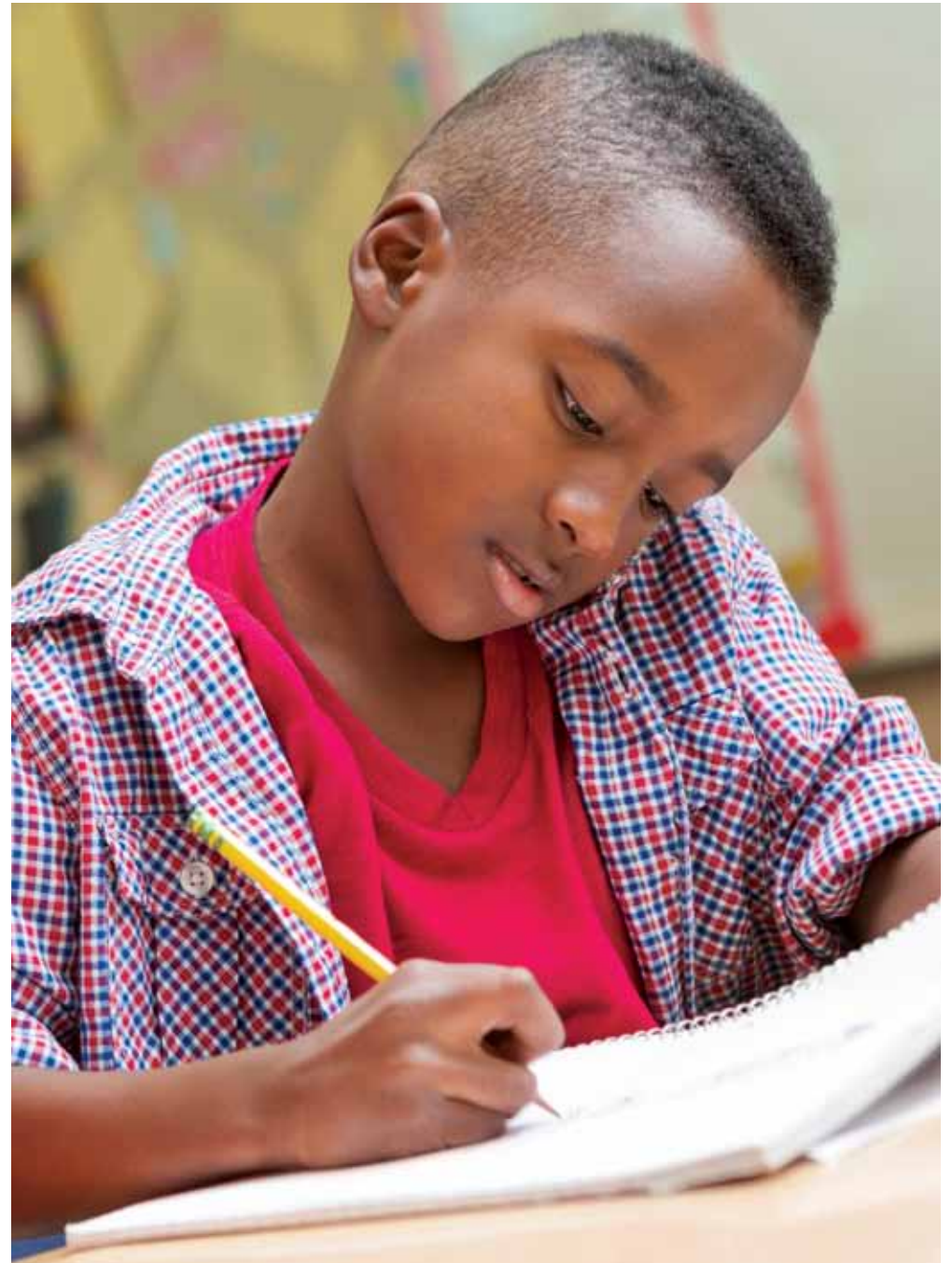
IVORY A. TOLDSON, PH.D.
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“What about to be seen as a person with a name, then POOF a statistic and to many a shame...”

– Asa Fludd, an African-American 11th-grader

Behind every statistic, there is a human spirit—a spirit that is as fragile as it is resilient. In the U.S., Black and Hispanic students carry the burden of scoring lower on essentially every known measure of achievement or aptitude than Whites and Asians. These tests often serve as gatekeepers to specialized schools, gifted classes and elite colleges—or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, as determinants of special education, grade repetition and emotional-support classes.

Some parents blame the schools for inadequately preparing their children. The schools respond by blaming the parents. Test companies blame social inequities and factors such as single-parent households and poverty (Educational Testing Services, 2012). And the cyclical blame game continues, with solutions for Black students’ progress almost an afterthought.



FAILING BLACK STUDENTS

When reporting on the achievement gap, the media have largely ignored complex issues regarding the merits of testing, including bias and fairness, choosing instead to accept the tests at face value. To illustrate, let's examine how and why, over the last several years, many media outlets have been reporting that nearly 90% of Black children from elementary school through high school graduation lack reading proficiency.

In 2011, researchers at Harvard released the report *Globally Challenged: Are U.S. Students Ready to Compete?*, which highlighted gaps between races within the U.S. as well as between the U.S. and 65 countries that participated in the Program for International Student Assessment (Peterson, Woessmann, Hanushek, & Lastra-Anadon, 2011). For one section of the report, the team of four White research scholars removed all minority participants from their analysis because they found it “worth inquiring as to whether differences between the U. S. and other countries are attributable to the substantial minority population within the United States” (Peterson et al., 2011). In other words, are students of color to blame?

The report inspired coverage from Black media outlets, including BET.com, which published an article with this telling headline: “Report: Only 13% of 2011 Black Graduates Proficient in Reading” (Wright, 2011). Similarly, in 2010, the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) found that only 12% of Black 4th-grade boys were proficient in reading, compared with 38% of White boys (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010), as reported in the *New York Times* article, “Proficiency of Black students is found to be far lower than expected” (Gabriel, 2010). People pay attention to these conclusions because they are shocking—but are they really true?

What if these tests are not accurately measuring proficiency? Why aren't we asking questions such as: How is this proficiency being measured? What texts and tests are being used? Are these tests valid and culturally fair? How and under what conditions are these tests being administered? Instead of a tacit approval of measures that conclude that almost 90% of Black people lack reading proficiency, shouldn't we be wondering how it is possible to have any Black publications if almost 90% of the Black population can't read? Shouldn't we be questioning a system using tests that seem only to reinforce something we think we already know about Black people? We've all heard the adage, “If you ever want to keep anything away from a Black person, hide it in a book.”

SEPARATING TESTS FROM TEST TAKERS

Imagine that your 4th-grade son is randomly selected to take a test of reading proficiency. He is given little information about the purpose of the assessment, but he can reasonably conclude that the test will not influence his grades or grade promotion at his current school. To test his level of reading comprehension, he is given a two-page passage about bees (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Although he can read every word, the passage is extremely boring to him. Because the test is timed, he has to use a particular style of reading that feels contrived. At the end, he has to answer a series of questions, which have many plausible answers. In general, attributes like imagination and creativity work against him because the test requires him to be literal and deductive.

Such is the experience of children who take the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—and yet it has great power. Both the CGCS report and the Harvard study used NAEP assessment data to find that 88% of 4th-grade Black boys and 87% of all Black 12th graders lack reading proficiency.

Although we cannot deny the literacy problems in the Black community, I remain skeptical about reports that present highly inflated percentages of Black people who lack reading proficiency. Indeed, I'm convinced that the problem lies less with children and more with the tests—specifically, with the lack of understanding among adults about multiple literacies. In Florida, for example, Edlexander Rabassa, a sophomore at Colonial High School in Orlando, performed exceptionally well in his Advanced Placement classes and earned college credits before finishing high school. Yet he failed the reading competency exam required to graduate. Apparently, Edlexander is in good company. Orange County School Board member Rick Roach has two master's degrees, yet he too failed the state test for reading comprehension (Winerip, 2010). I care about these stories, because they are my story as well.

CONFESSIONS OF A BAD TEST TAKER WHO LEARNS HOW TO READ

When I was in the 4th grade, I was assigned to a “slow readers” group, based on tests and my teacher's ratings. Today, I clearly remember the shame of being relegated to a group, with small, dumbed-down textbooks—a clear demarcation of the class based on ability. I passed the 4th grade, but I was broken.

I transferred to a new school, where I joined Ms. Law's 5th-grade class. Ms. Law believed I was smart, and she gave me the confidence to try my best. Yet I continued to have severe problems with boredom, and I only managed to maintain decent grades through a lucky combination of academic, social and survival skills throughout middle and high school.

ACCORDING TO THE MOST RECENT AVAILABLE DATA²⁹

17.1%

OF THE K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOL POPULATION IS BLACK

9.2%

OF CHILDREN IN K-12 PARTICIPATING IN GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAMS ARE BLACK

21.7%

OF CHILDREN (GRADES K-9 ONLY) RECEIVING SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES FOR DEVELOPMENTAL DELAY WERE BLACK, AS WERE 20.2% OF

CHILDREN RECEIVING SERVICES FOR A SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY, 28.9% OF CHILDREN RECEIVING SERVICES FOR "EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE," AND 32% OF CHILDREN RECEIVING SERVICES FOR "INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY"³⁰

The Isis Papers, a collection of essays in which Frances Cress Welsing theorizes about a global system of White supremacy (Welsing, 1991), was the first book I read cover to cover. I was in the 11th grade and never thought I was the type of person who could read "big books." But it was a book of my own choosing, and I read it in a manner that felt natural to me. When reading, I often skipped ahead, then worked backward—making connections throughout the book with a less rigid focus on the sequence of the pages. This method of reading helped me process information, but did little to help me perform better on tests. Indeed, my ACT scores were so low that my scorecard stated that I had about a 15% probability of graduating from my eventual alma mater, Louisiana State University.

Luckily, that summer I got a job preparing student records at the university's Junior Division, where I looked at hundreds of ACT scores paired with students' college transcripts. This exercise helped me conclude that my ACT scores did not have to mean what the experts said they meant. In addition, I used the services of the school's Learning Assistance Center, which was an obscure and underused campus resource for students who were brave enough to admit they had learning challenges. The center taught me that I was forcing myself to read in a way that was unnatural to me. The holistic methods that I used to read *The Isis Papers* were, like concept mapping, the methods I should have been using to read my biology textbooks. With guidance that recognized my style as a strength and not a deficit, I elevated my performance in school. I graduated in four years, completed a master's degree at Penn State University, received my Ph.D. from Temple University at the age of 28, and ultimately became editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Negro Education*.

NEARLY ONE IN TEN BLACK CHILDREN ENROLLED IN K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS WERE PARTICIPATING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

I've shared my journey as an example of how our system could work to foster a love of reading, to identify individual strengths, and to utilize and expand available resources to support student achievement. I believe that the inferences that adults are making about tests are abating the intellectual and personal development of millions of children, many of whom are just like me. If not for a few people who cared less about a statistic and more about "a person with a name," I would not have achieved any success in life. The same is true for the children and emerging adults within our sphere of influence who are burdened with statistics that cheapen their existence. They need someone to tell them that they are good at something. They need schools like Loyola Academy in St. Louis, Mo., where Black male middle-school kids can select some of the books they study from. Or schools like Urban Prep in Chicago, which has placed 100% of its Black male graduates in college since opening in 2006 (Ahmed-Ullah, 2012) –although given our current obsession with diminishing the achievement of Black students, Urban Prep's stellar record does little to quiet test hawks who have minimized its success by citing low ACT scores (Klonsky, 2010).

According to my independent analysis of the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 for the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, Black males are the most likely to be placed in special education and the least likely to be placed in honors classes. Today, 9.1% of Black male high school students are in special education, compared with the national average of 6.5%; and 14.5% of Black males are in at least one honors classes, compared with the national average of 25.6% (Ingels, et al., 2011). Yet even within these dismal statistics, **there is a bright spot: a higher percentage of Black males are in honors classes than in special education.**

Nearly 1 in 10 Black boys have been diagnosed with ADHD, surpassed only by White boys at 13%. Among the 9.1% of Black boys who have been diagnosed with ADHD, 33% are in special education and 12% are in honors classes (Toldson, In Press). Another bright spot: Black boys with disabilities can and do end up in honors classes.

So what's the difference between a Black boy with ADHD who ends up in honors classes and those who end up in special education? It has less to do with the differences among the children and more to do with the difference makers they encounter—difference makers like Tim King at Urban Prep, H. Eric Clark at Loyola Academy and my 5th-grade teacher, Ms. Law, who saw in me the genius that is in all of our children. It is, as always, about relationships—the difference-makers who can raise our children up, and the standardized tests, that can bring them down. We must learn from one (the difference-makers) to improve the other (the tests) to bring us closer to hitting the mark when we measure the true literacy and achievement levels of all of our children.

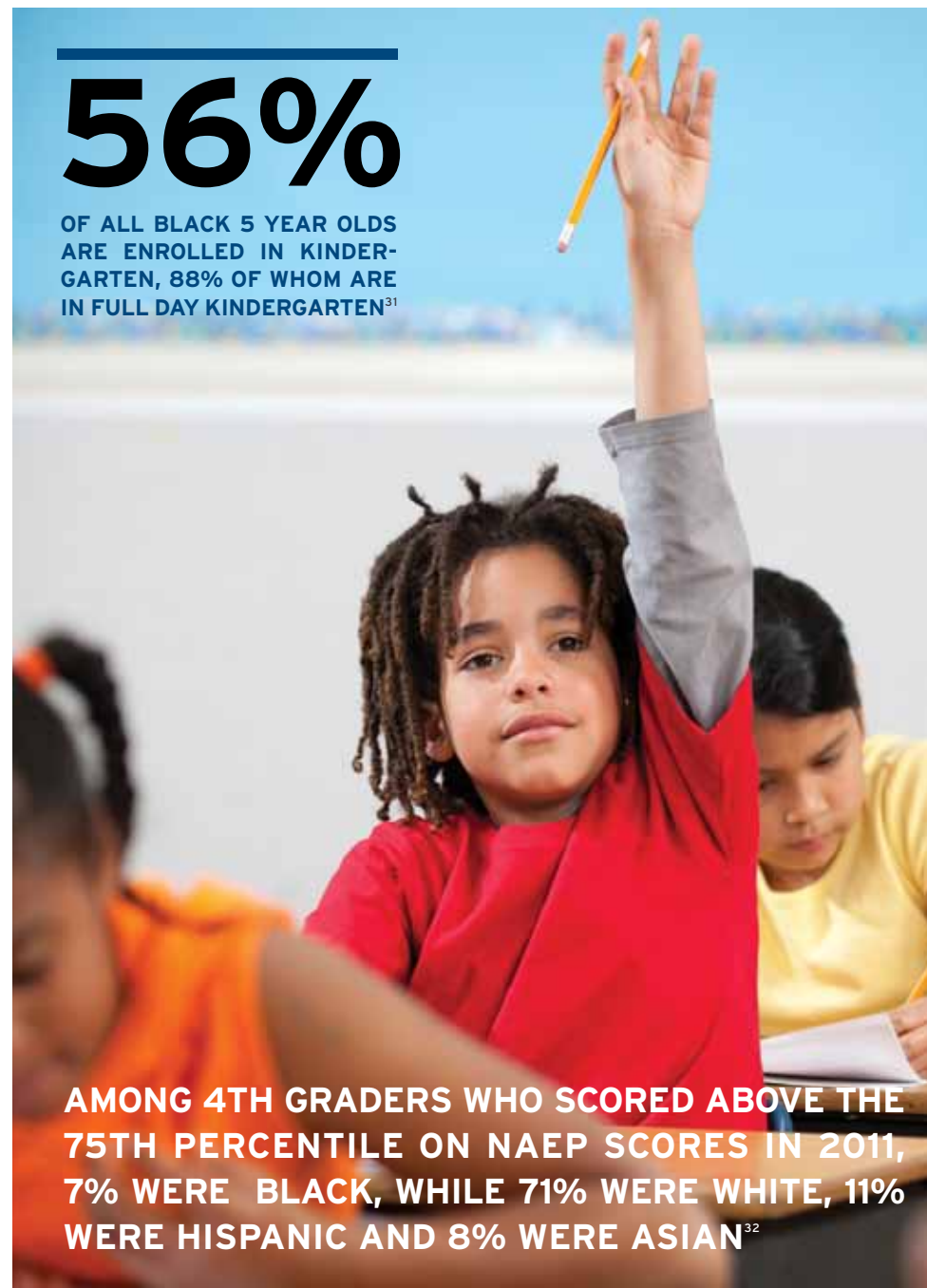
NOT JUST POSSIBLE, BUT PLAUSIBLE: P-3 AS A STRATEGY TO CLOSE ACHIEVEMENT GAPS EARLY

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Since 2001, when *No Child Left Behind* required states to not only gather student test scores but also disaggregate those data along race, gender and socio-economic categories, educators and policymakers have focused extensively on closing achievement gaps. Even before then, since 1990, when the National Education Goals Panel identified school readiness as Goal One, federal, state and local governments have widely promoted early childhood education and school readiness as key strategies to raising student achievement and increasing children's success in school and in life.

Indeed, over the past several decades, increasing numbers of studies of early childhood programs—both those that were conducted at small-scale, research-driven levels (e.g., Perry Preschool, Abecedarian) and those conducted at larger scales (e.g., evaluations of Oklahoma's and New Jersey's state-funded pre-kindergarten programs)—demonstrate that high-quality pre-school programs can close achievement gaps and confer long-term benefits to individuals and society as a whole. Compelling stories of schools, communities and districts that have made remarkable progress in raising the achievement of vulnerable students as they enter kindergarten can be found in pockets around the country. In short, closing early achievement gaps is undeniably possible.



56%

OF ALL BLACK 5 YEAR OLDS
ARE ENROLLED IN KINDER-
GARTEN, 88% OF WHOM ARE
IN FULL DAY KINDERGARTEN³¹

AMONG 4TH GRADERS WHO SCORED ABOVE THE
75TH PERCENTILE ON NAEP SCORES IN 2011,
7% WERE BLACK, WHILE 71% WERE WHITE, 11%
WERE HISPANIC AND 8% WERE ASIAN³²

Unfortunately, based on National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) data, in 2011, fully 68% of the nation's 4th graders read below the proficient level. When comparing Black and White 4th graders, there is a 26-point gap in reading proficiency levels (favoring white children) and a 28-point gap between children eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch and those not eligible (favoring the higher income children). While there has certainly been progress in closing these achievement gaps over the past 10 years, the improvements have been incremental and the gains seen before children enter school are not sustained.

Since school readiness has been an important policy priority in many states, since every school district and elementary school has been required to acknowledge and analyze its own student achievement data, and if closing achievement gaps is possible, why are students in the United States not in a better place today?

Given a myriad of factors—including under-funded, pre-school programs and services, persistent socio-economic and racial discrepancies in children's access to high-quality K-12 schools and teachers and an alarming lack of instructional support in both early learning and early elementary classrooms—closing achievement gaps may indeed be possible, but is not currently plausible in the majority of school districts and communities around the country.

Let's examine some of these contributing factors. First, the high-quality, pre-school programs that have been shown to provide both short- and long-term advantages to participating children, particularly those coming from low-income families, are not being implemented at scale. This is not for a lack of will or intention; early childhood advocates are both dedicated and strategic. It is, however, a matter of political realities. High-quality programs require financial and human investments that simply are not practical in today's economy. Many pre-school programs—across Head Start, child care and state-funded PreK sectors—fall short on any number of quality variables, including the qualifications of teachers, the program dosage, the intensive engagement of families and the access provided to children most at risk for school failure. For example, Head Start serves only 40% of eligible preschool-age children and 3% of eligible infants and toddlers. The variability described above does not mean that pre-school programs are bad for children or not making important contributions to children's growth and development. It does, however, mean that pre-school programs' meaningful impact on achievement gaps will be the exception, not the rule, in most communities.

Second, we know that the quality of literacy and math instruction, coupled with the quality of interactions between teachers and students in elementary school has a long-term impact on children's achievement. It has also been shown to be particularly important for children of color. Indeed, research

suggests that the “performance of African-Americans, more so than other students, is influenced to a large degree by the social support and encouragement they receive from teachers” (Noguera, 2008). Children must learn to read and do early math (and do both well) as precursors to all later learning. Unfortunately, because of the prevalent approach to K-12 school finance and attendance zones, many of this country's low-income and minority students are not enrolled in schools that provide ambitious instruction that is differentiated to meet a wide diversity of developmental, linguistic and cultural needs. Indeed, research repeatedly demonstrates that children most in need of stellar elementary education are those most likely to end up in low-resource schools with less effective teachers.

Third, data on the quality of interactions between teachers and students in PreK-3rd grade classrooms across the country show that instructional support is woefully low. There has been significant attention paid to the quality and appropriateness of learning standards (including early learning, K-12 and Common Core standards), the adequacy and equity of child-based assessments and the ideal credentials that teachers should hold. Ultimately, however, these are all just documents and tools. Inanimate objects cannot directly improve or diminish a child's education. The power of these documents is in how human beings—adults—actively engage with them and enact them in the classroom. Simply, the quality of a child's education ultimately rests on the interactive instruction and guidance he or she receives. National data show that teachers are fairly successful in providing emotional support and effective classroom management, but fall short of the mark in providing ambitious and differentiated instruction. And this holds true across both early learning and K-3 classrooms. Instructional quality is poor and needs improvement.

Taken together, these factors point to the fact that an exclusive focus on school readiness and the provision of high-quality, early education experiences to children before they enter kindergarten is an important, albeit inadequate, response to closing achievement gaps.

There is another way. A way that builds on—indeed engages and relies on—the current array of pre-school programs and services. Rather than relying on expensive, albeit potent, one-year inoculation (i.e., high-quality PreK), we should look at modest but meaningful improvements to the quality of education provided to young children in each and every year along their early learning continuum from PreK through 3rd grade (P-3). P-3 requires improving the quality of learning opportunities provided to children at each age and grade level along the continuum (i.e., infant/toddler, preschool for 3 year olds, pre-kindergarten for 4 year olds, kindergarten and 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades). P-3 rests on “both/and” thinking. We must *both* improve children's early learning experiences prior to entering kindergarten *and* include elementary schools in our reform vision.

With a focus on a continuum of learning that spans at least five years (i.e., Pre-K, full-day kindergarten, and 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades) and often reaches further down to include pre-school for 3-year olds and infant/toddler services, P-3 approaches recognize that there is no silver bullet or one-shot solution to closing achievement gaps and supporting positive learning and development. P-3 reflects the fact that every year matters in children's early learning and elementary years. P-3 approaches also understand that special, once-a-week/after-school/summer programs cannot conquer achievement gaps. Rather, deliberate attention to improving the daily instruction and learning experiences provided to young children is required. P-3 takes the slow, steady and collaborative approach.

Three key terms can be associated with P-3: quality, continuity and alignment. P-3 requires that children's early learning and early elementary settings provide intentional, culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate instruction that balances cognitive, social, emotional and physical development (*quality*). It also requires that children's learning opportunities provide an adequate amount of time, year after year, for children to have sustained child-friendly yet instructionally rich experiences (*dosage/continuity*). Further, P-3 ensures that there is alignment with the developmental continuum, across learning settings. When we put these three elements together (quality, continuity, and alignment), we can find standards and assessments that are age-appropriate and, at their core, help teachers improve and differentiate instruction for every child. We see teachers collaborating and sharing data across age and grade levels. We see schools partnering with community-based, early learning programs and families partnering with both. We see children transitioning from setting to setting, year to year, grade to grade with the skills and supports they need to successfully navigate new experiences.

I, along with my colleague Julia Coffman, recently published the *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches*.⁴ It provides an on-the-ground perspective of the eight foundational components of comprehensive P-3 approaches. These components include:

- 1) Mechanisms, resources and structures that reflect, support and sustain shared vision, collaborative relationships and mutual accountabilities between 0-5 and K-12 (Cross-Sector Work);**
- 2) Administrators (i.e., district superintendents, school principals and early childhood directors) who actively create a culture and organizational structures that ensure the quality of PreK-3rd grade learning (Administrator Effectiveness);**
- 3) Teachers who are actively dedicated to providing high-quality instruction and effective learning experiences for all children in PreK-3rd grade (Teacher Effectiveness);**

4) Standards, curricula and assessments that focus on both academic and social-emotional skills, and are aligned to create instructional coherence for children in PreK-3rd grade (Instructional Tools);

5) Physical spaces and emotional environments (i.e., campuses, buildings, schools and classrooms) that promote collaborative relationships, actively engage all children in a variety of learning experiences and settings and support the health and wellness of children and adults (Learning Environment);

6) The use of current, relevant and high-quality data from multiple sources to improve schools, programs, classrooms, instruction, professional development and other systems (Data-Driven Improvement);

7) Families that are actively and systemically involved with PreK-3rd teachers and administrators as full partners in helping their children develop, learn and achieve (Engaged Families); and

8) Ensuring that every child, especially those most at risk for school failure, has access to a continuity of services and a clear pathway of high-quality education from PreK-3rd grade (Continuity and Pathways).

P-3 approaches rely on common sense, teamwork and a thoughtful re-thinking of "the way we've always done things." There isn't much glitz or glam to P-3. There are no magic curricula, no singular approach to professional development and no rigid model to adhere to. P-3 takes time and intentionality to build trust, but it can be done with existing resources. P-3 requires a willingness to have both 0-5 and K-12 voices at the table sharing a common vocabulary and working toward common goals.

In closing, as a field, we need to keep our eye on the prize. That prize should always be the long-term success of children. Far too many children—especially black, brown, low-income, dual language and immigrant children—fall through the cracks. While, yes, we need to intensify the drumbeat for high-quality, pre-school programs that are accessible, affordable and culturally responsive to *all* children, early childhood advocates and implementers also need to re-double efforts to join forces with the K-12 system. Public education is an ally, not an enemy, in the campaign to close achievement gaps. A 4-year old in a Head Start program does not have needs that are drastically different from a 6-year old in a public school, 1st-grade classroom. Our systems and adult behaviors should not create artificial boundaries or differences between 4-year olds and 6-year olds (or 3-year olds and 7-year olds). They all deserve a rich, developmentally appropriate foundation of learning that sets them on a promising trajectory for lifelong success. P-3 approaches make this not just possible, but plausible.

The theoretical and practical case for a P-3 strategy and framework has been made clearly and eloquently. Indeed, a number of states, districts and schools have incorporated elements of the framework into their daily practice with positive achievement results for students. It is critical, however, to maintain the richness of the framework as it is increasingly used in communities struggling to close their achievement gaps, and effectively serve and educate their Black children and families. By viewing the P-3 framework through a cultural lens, and understanding its elements in a cultural context, the framework itself becomes stronger and more meaningful for Black children, families and communities. Here are three core areas for recommendations, reflecting the keys of quality, continuity and alignment, to help states, districts and schools guide their efforts:⁵

1) Recognize the Importance of Positive Relationship Development Between Children and Teachers

- Strive for low teacher-child ratios.
- Value the role of culture and community context by prioritizing and facilitating conversations that include discussions of race, class and culture.
- Support the recruitment of an increasingly diverse teaching force, seeking out and promoting talent from within schools and surrounding communities.
- Support teachers to identify and engage in a range of classroom management strategies that specifically support the learning of Black students.

2) Create Strong, Culturally Relevant and Systemic Family and Community Engagement

- Build upon good cultural practice, such as including children's extended family members, engaging in summertime home visits, leading school-based playgroups, encouraging parent-led workshops and holding regular cultural celebrations.
- Engage and reach out to families early, often, positively and with different means of communication.
- Provide opportunities to explicitly teach teachers from all backgrounds how to develop and strengthen productive relationships with parents and the community at large.

- Insist that teachers learn about the context of race and culture bias in which their children and families are embedded so that they can make conscious decisions about engaging with family and community members in ways that demonstrate a deeper and more complete understanding.

3) Prioritize the Importance of Social-Emotional Development

- Support children's moral development by recognizing how strengths can be obscured by stereotype. Be wary of character education programs that are not reflective of the strengths and expectations of children's cultural, familial and community contexts.
- Create a positive school climate and culture that addresses the motivations of diverse students by focusing on children's need for affiliation and community as well as the drive for individualistic achievement.

TEACHERS ACROSS RACES EXPECT LESS, ON AVERAGE, FROM BLACK STUDENTS THAN WHITES³³

SINCE 1971, BLACK STUDENTS' 4TH GRADE READING SCORES HAVE INCREASED BY

36 POINTS

COMPARED TO WHITE STUDENTS' SCORES, WHICH HAVE INCREASED BY 15 POINTS AND HISPANIC STUDENTS' SCORES, WHICH HAVE INCREASED BY 25 POINTS³⁴

POINT OF PROOF:

NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

The Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) Promise Neighborhood operates as one integrated program that works across many partner organizations and schools, with NAZ scholars at the center. Families and children move through a “cradle to career” pipeline, allowing NAZ staff and their partners to provide comprehensive support services through three pillars of impact: Family Engagement and Opportunity Alignment, Education Pipeline, and Whole Family Wrap Around Support. The purpose of Northside Achievement Zone is to end multigenerational poverty in North Minneapolis.

WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”

The NAZ Promise Neighborhood is a collaboration of organizations and schools partnering with families in a geographic “Zone” of North Minneapolis to prepare children to graduate from high school ready for college. Our resources are dedicated toward measurable outcomes for children and families. Success is gauged by results for children and families, not programs and organizations. NAZ partners work together to build evidence-based solutions that drive measurable improvements with NAZ families. Each child’s progress toward kindergarten-readiness, grade-level achievement, and college readiness is tracked. If the data shows ineffectiveness, we will revise our plan until we get it right.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?

Our geographic “Zone” is a contiguous 13 x 18 block, predominately Black area in North Minneapolis. Families living in the Zone are confronted with challenging factors: physical and behavioral health issues; instability in housing and safety; and severe economic disparities. Already at an economic disadvantage, children and families must endure persistent educational disparities.

Currently, NAZ has partnered with 320 families and 850 scholars, 58% of whom are African American (30% did not report their race), and nearly one-third of whom are children under the age of 8. Additionally, 100% of NAZ-enrolled families are economically disadvantaged, with only 25% reporting full-or part-time employment.

Highly aware of the deepening education and employment crises among Black men and boys, NAZ’s Family Academy works explicitly with fathers and sons to build a sense of empowerment and to improve parenting skills. Currently, NAZ has engaged 47 African American fathers and 248 African American boys.

HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

Northside Achievement Zone will know success when community members see high-achieving African-American students from North Minneapolis attending and graduating from colleges and universities across the nation. We’ll recognize success when “Crimestopper” signs are a rarity and economic vitality, thriving business districts and strong neighborhoods are the norm. Success will be seen in the elimination of educational disparities in our neighborhood schools and the continuance of a committed network of schools, nonprofit organizations and governmental agencies. Finally, we define success as the reversal of premature death, insufficient education, joblessness and high incarceration rates among Black men and boys in particular.

Statistically, our desired outcomes are:

- **1,000 families and 2,500 children are engaged in NAZ-networked programs and services;**
- **our youngest scholars are kindergarten ready at school-age;**
- **our elementary school scholars are performing at grade level in reading at the third grade benchmark;**
- **our older scholars are graduating from high school ready for college.**

With the achievement of these outcomes, our community will be empowered and led to future success by healthy parents and strong families.



THE POVERTY THRESHOLD FOR A FAMILY OF FOUR IN 2011 WAS \$22,350

42%

OF BLACK CHILDREN AGES 0-8 WERE LIVING IN POVERTY, COMPARED TO 24% OF ALL CHILDREN AGES 0-8³⁵

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

Evaluation and measurement are infused into all aspects of our work as a source of continuous quality improvement and a mechanism to direct future work. We are truly a “learning collaborative,” with all partners and stakeholders driven by family data and progress toward our outcomes.

NAZ has designed and implemented a rigorous internal evaluation and program performance management system, designed and managed by University of Minnesota colleagues, in close coordination with Wilder Research. Our internal, formative quality evaluation proceeds in three stages: 1) selection and documentation of known, effective practices; 2) ongoing evaluation of implementation; and 3) short-term effects and systematic practice improvement to build on lessons learned. This system helps us monitor our work and measure our impact across all aspects of our continuum of solutions.

In only one example, we know that our Family Academy Program has shown graduating fathers to be more persistent in working through daily problems; motivated to work on their goals with their families; and better communicators with their significant other. Our fathers now talk about family from a team perspective and are very intentional in their support of their wives, partners and children.

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

NAZ is effective and will continue to be successful because families receive one-on-one support from the NAZ engagement team, made up of skilled “family coaches” from the North Minneapolis community. The team includes a Connector to support whole-family stability and an Academic Navigator to facilitate academic achievement.

67% OF BLACK CHILDREN AGES 0-8 WERE LIVING IN LOW-INCOME FAMILIES (INCOME OF \$44,700 OR LESS FOR A FAMILY OF FOUR) IN 2011, COMPARED TO 46% NATIONALLY FOR ALL CHILDREN AGES 0-8³⁶



27%

OF BLACK CHILDREN OVERALL AND 45% OF BLACK CHILDREN IN FAMILIES LIVING BELOW THE POVERTY THRESHOLD LIVE IN AREAS WHERE AT LEAST 30% OF RESIDENTS HAVE INCOMES BELOW THE POVERTY THRESHOLD³⁷

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

Initially, one of the challenges NAZ faced was building trust with community members. Our families live in a Zone with underperforming schools and extremely high concentrations of poverty, crime and violence. Neighbors continue to see businesses and Black middle-class families leave and are often on the receiving end of policies and procedures that widened the achievement gap. Further to our detriment, a tornado touched down in the Zone in 2011; some 3,700 residences were damaged by the storm to some degree. Two years later, many homes are still in need of repairs. Lastly, there are those who see North Minneapolis as an area unworthy of investment. Often, our families are solely blamed for the social inequities that trap them in poverty and are not provided with the resources to rise above these crippling conditions.

NAZ's efforts started with a door-to-door enrollment campaign. Because members of the Engagement Team come from the North Minneapolis community, they approach families with a shared familiarity and commitment to progress. Through trusted relationships with trained individuals, the Engagement Team inspires a new commitment from parents and community members. Team members solidify the belief that children will graduate from college and work with parents to identify barriers, set family goals, and encourage behaviors that support positive outcome. The Engagement Team connects families with the right resources from partner organizations, based on their needs and goals. NAZ then coordinates these resources to stabilize housing, establish and support career paths for parents, and address physical and behavioral health challenges.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

NAZ would advise communities, funders and government agencies to invest in the principles that produce exemplary community engagement and development partnerships:

- ✓ **Clear and concise mission that speaks to the true needs of the community and illuminates the path to long-term, sustainable solutions.**
- ✓ **Strong leaders unified around a clear mission and goals and with a connection to the community they serve.**
- ✓ **Community relations efforts that reflect and involve the community served.**
- ✓ **Collaboration with schools, nonprofits, government agencies and field experts that centers on the well-being and empowerment of families and scholars.**
- ✓ **Strategic and sustainability planning that helps identify and accomplish goals and empowers the community served—academically, economically and socially.**
- ✓ **Data-driven operations that produce measurable outcomes for children and families and are gauged by results for children and families, not programs and organizations.**

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

With access to educational resources, encouraging schools and healthy community networks, the most vulnerable Black families can be lifted to extraordinary heights. The energy society uses to perpetuate the misperception that Black families are waiting for an all-powerful savior can be redirected toward true economic and social empowerment; in our Zone we are showing the nation the positive effects of self-reliance and community engagement. When our first high school graduating class of scholars receives their diplomas in 2034, NAZ parents and staff will be on hand to hear their plans to attend Morehouse, Spelman, University of Minnesota, Harvard and other prominent institutions of higher education. NAZ wants North Minneapolis' Black families to be the model for everything beautiful that comes from having respect and love for oneself and from healthy community collaboration.

SUPPORTING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS BEGINNING AT BIRTH

DAVID J. JOHNS

Executive Director, White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans

The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans (WHIEEAA) has a mandate on behalf of African American students to close the achievement gap. This goal requires attention to the full education continuum, from the early childhood years through adulthood. We are honored to stand with the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) to ensure that all African American students have access to high-quality early learning opportunities starting at birth.⁶

Neither zip code nor skin tone should predetermine the quality of a child's opportunities; however, too many children from low-income families, and African American students in particular, are without access to high-quality early education, which can make them less likely to enter elementary school prepared for success (Ackerman and Barnett, 2005). Consider that, by 3rd grade, children from low-income families who are not reading at grade level are six times less likely to graduate from high school than those who are proficient in reading (Hernandez, 2012). High-quality early education provides the foundation for African American students to be successful in school and in life.



Learning begins at birth and the preparation for learning starts well before birth. We cannot solve the employment or education crises facing Black children and America without first ensuring that all children have access to high-quality early education (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). Not only must we work towards providing African American students with access to high-quality early education, we must also make a concerted effort to provide support for them inside and outside the classroom, extending through college completion and career entry.

According to a publication from the National Academies Press, which did an extensive review of multidisciplinary research, “From the time of conception to the first day of kindergarten, development proceeds at a pace exceeding that of any subsequent stage of life” (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). According to the same study, however, during this period of remarkable development, children are also very vulnerable. Thus, access to high-quality early education, especially for low-income students, can be the difference between a pathway that leads to the White House and one that leads to the jailhouse (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007).

High-quality early education can help overcome cognitive and non-cognitive challenges facing African American students, including the absence of a father, exposure to violence and disproportionate representation in detention and special education programs (Council for Exceptional Children and the National Alliance of Black School Educators, 2002). African American children who participate in Early Head Start have higher receptive vocabularies, display less aggressive behavior, report lower levels of bullying and score higher on their math and reading assessments in elementary grades than African American children who do not participate in the program (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Parents, families and communities also benefit from high-quality early education. African American parents with children who participate in such programs provide better language and literacy environments, demonstrate increases in emotionally supportive parenting and show higher levels of support for education in the home. African American parents of children in Early Head Start programs report fewer symptoms of depression, lower levels of alcohol use and fewer moves (Head Start Program Information Report, 2013).

The first step to ensuring that African American students grow up to become successful and healthy adults is to give them access to high-quality early education. To accomplish this, the WHIEEAA is working with members of faith- and community-based organizations, and the early education advocacy

community to raise awareness among parents and families about the importance of investing in children’s well-being during the critical early years. Our goal is to ensure that parents and families can identify and have access to high-quality education programs. The WHIEEAA is undertaking efforts to afford African American children exposure to science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics programs and concepts early and often. The staff is also working with publishers to produce more books and content reflective of the language, culture and heritage of African American students, as well as of other cultures, to help ensure that they develop the vocabulary and pre-literacy skills needed to make the critical transition from learning to read to reading to learn.

As described throughout this report, there are many opportunities to ensure we start early on the path toward educational excellence for African Americans. The Obama Administration is proud to have invested in some of the programs described below:

Home Visiting: Voluntary home visiting programs match parents with trained professionals to provide information and support during pregnancy and throughout a child’s first years of life. Quality, voluntary home visiting leads to fewer children in social welfare, juvenile detention centers, and mental health systems.

With the support of Congress, from 2009 to 2011 the federal government invested \$1.5 billion, through the Affordable Care Act, to expand home visitation programs that can provide African American students with the services and educational support needed to improve their health, development, and ability to learn.⁷ Additional investments must be made to increase access to this critical support.

Child Care: In the United States, more than 12.5 million children under the age of five were in some type of regular childcare arrangement each week in spring 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). On average, children of working mothers spent 33 hours a week in child care, many with multiple providers, to allow parents to work during both traditional and non-traditional working hours (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Childcare is an essential work support, which also provides opportunities to develop foundational skills in young children. However, for too many African American children, the extreme cost associated with high-quality childcare results in lost opportunities to develop the tools needed to begin school ready to learn. More must be done to subsidize the cost of high-quality childcare for parents who cannot afford such programs because they are unemployed or underemployed in jobs that do not provide family-sustaining wages or opportunities for advancement.

Head Start and Early Head Start: Head Start⁸ and Early Head Start circumvent the high cost of quality early education by providing federal support to programs that agree to serve low-income, disadvantaged children and their families. These families would otherwise be unable to cover the costs of enrolling their children in center-based programs.⁹

A recent impact study of Head Start found that the program has a positive, statistically significant impact on children's preschool experiences, school readiness, language and vocabulary skills (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Black children in the four-year-old cohort were reported to have "reduced inattentiveness, fewer problems with structured learning, peer interactions or teacher interactions and better relationships with teachers" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). While the long-term effects of Head Start deserve additional research, the program's ability to close education gaps and prepare low-income and minority children for kindergarten is difficult to deny. For decades, Head Start has improved life opportunities for African American children. It should be noted, however, that in 2012, Head Start was only able to serve 40% of eligible children, while Early Head Start serves fewer than 4% (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, and Squires, 2012).

Existing investments can be strengthened if Head Start programs and preschool through 3rd-grade teachers and school leaders collaborate to provide joint professional development and successful transitions into elementary school. We can also further strengthen critical links with health, nutrition, mental health and family support for African American children and their families.

Preschool: Today more than 1 million children have access to Pre-K programs (Horowitz and Barnett, 2013), which can provide a final opportunity to close or overcome gaps resulting from missed early learning opportunities. High-quality Pre-K programs can also strengthen foundational skills so that African American students are fully equipped for success.

The last decade has seen growth in state-funded Pre-K programs (Barnett et al., 2012). However, as states and local municipalities have struggled with the recent economic crisis, our youngest children have suffered considerably. While enrollment in preschool programs has increased, the amount spent by states per child decreased in constant dollars from \$5,020 to \$3,841, a drop of 23% (Barnett et al, 2012). We need to ensure that young children, particularly African American students, are not neglected as we continue to recover our economy.

Access to an early education program is only part of the story; quality is essential to ensuring children have the cognitive and non-cognitive skills they need to start school ready to learn. To increase access and quality, the Obama Administration invested in education programs, including Race to The Top Early Learning, Promise Neighborhoods, and Opportunity Zones. The president's fiscal year 2013 budget request also includes \$75 billion to ensure that all four-year-old children have access to full-day preschool programs.¹⁰ With the support of legislators at every level, the U.S. can continue to make early investments that will yield dividends for generations.

In the coming years, the WHIEEAA will continue to facilitate critical conversations around supporting African American students by:

- 1) Raising awareness of and increasing access to programs that enhance education, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities for African American students, families, and communities;**
- 2) Ensuring that all caring African American adults are engaged in supporting learning and development; and**
- 3) Taking on the essential task of changing the way we talk about African American students in public and in private so that how we demonstrate support for African American students is aligned with ensuring they are and feel valued, supported, and protected.**

While we must be careful to not generalize and suggest that all African American students are in crisis, all African American students can benefit from knowing that they are valued, supported and protected—especially at home, in school and in their communities—beginning at birth. We must commit to doing all we can to ensure that African American students are developing fundamental academic and social skills, and are learning and engaged in school. Creating protective, safe and productive environments for African American students requires correcting myths that give life to the fallacy that African American students cannot achieve at extremely high levels, in spite of generations of brothers and sisters who have done exactly that.

These are but a few of the ways the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans is engaging in the critical work of multiplying opportunities for educating Black children to the highest standards. We look forward to a continued relationship with the National Black Child Development Institute and with parents, families and communities throughout the country to ensure educational excellence for African Americans, beginning at birth.



QUALITY HEALTH CARE AND GOOD NUTRITION, BOTH FOR PREGNANT MOTHERS AND YOUNG CHILDREN, IS ESSENTIAL FOR A CHILD'S HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT³⁸

90% OF BLACK CHILDREN HAVE HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE, CONSISTENT WITH THE NATIONAL AVERAGE OF 91%³⁹

90%

OF ALL BLACK CHILDREN ARE ON FOOD STAMPS AT SOME POINT BY THE AGE OF 20⁴²

13%

OF BLACK CHILDREN AGES 0-4 AND 19% OF BLACK CHILDREN AGES 5-14 HAVE ASTHMA⁴⁰

THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP), FORMERLY KNOWN AS FOOD STAMPS, IS A FEDERAL ANTI-HUNGER PROGRAM THAT PROVIDES BENEFITS TO LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS FOR PURCHASING FOOD. SNAP PLAYS A CRITICAL ROLE IN ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY AND ALLEVIATING POVERTY.

45%

OF SNAP PARTICIPANTS ARE CHILDREN

26%

OF BLACK CHILDREN AGES 6-17 ARE OBESE, COMPARED TO 14% OF WHITE CHILDREN OF THE SAME AGE⁴¹

23%

OF ALL HOUSEHOLD HEADS WHO ARE RECEIVING SNAP ARE BLACK⁴³

ENDNOTES

1. Due to the fact that the descriptive terms “Black,” “African American” and “culture” are defined and used in so many different ways in social science literature, we believe a note of explanation is in order with respect to their use here. At the National Black Child Development Institute, we operate from the assumption that race and culture are separate concepts—race being based on skin color and culture being based on socialization. Because the characteristics and trends we are most concerned about in this discussion are both racial and cultural in origin, we use the term “Black” to describe children and families who are both racially black and of African origin throughout the diaspora. To stay true to the language of other writers, however, African American also appears in their direct quotes and references to their original research, even where their descriptive reference is both racial and cultural. When, however, we are specifically talking about cultural patterns, we use “African American” to describe learned values, traditions, beliefs and behaviors with specific reference to Black people of African ancestry, recognizing that there is variation between and within groups of specific geographic and historical origin as well as generational variations.

MINORITY CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES: A POSITIVE LOOK

2. A couple of caveats, however, are in order. First, minority families and children include non-white racial groups, keeping in mind that race is a social construct and that there are no biological differences among ethnic groups. Second, the term “minority” is no longer descriptive of a group or useful because approximately half (49.9%) of American children under the age of five are of a racial or ethnic group other than white, according to 2012 U.S. census estimates, thus they are now the majority. Third, most of the research on minority children has focused on African American and Latino children and less on other minority groups. While there is a lot of commonality across groups, there are also across-groups, cultural-specific factors that may protect families or place them at risk that we know little about. Similarly, there are also within-group variability (e.g., country of origin, immigration history, religion) that render pan-ethnic terms such as Asian American or Latino not useful.

FAITH & CONFIDENCE: POSITIONING OUR HEARTS AND MINDS TO ASSURE SUCCESS IN THE LIVES OF BLACK CHILDREN

3. This term includes social workers, teachers, child care providers, health care providers, etc.

NOT JUST POSSIBLE, BUT PLAUSIBLE: P-3 AS A STRATEGY TO CLOSE ACHIEVEMENT GAPS EARLY

4. The full Framework can be accessed here: <http://depts.washington.edu/pthru3/framework.html>

5. “Adapted from the National Black Child Development Institute’s “A Framework That Works” (2010), available at www.nbcdi.org

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6. “High-quality programs” are defined as those employing highly skilled staff (with experience and credentials in child development or early learning related fields of study), maintaining small class sizes and high adult-to-student ratios, fostering language and resource-rich environments, employing age- and developmentally appropriate curricula, nurturing positive

relationships, and facilitating consistent child and family engagement (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child).

7. The fiscal year 2013 budget request includes \$1.5 billion for Home Visiting Programs and Supports.

8. Established during President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty and the Great Society in 1965, the Head Start program’s goal was to address challenges faced by students entering kindergarten without the skills and experience needed to be successful. In 1981 the program was codified in federal law, asserting a national interest in ensuring that disadvantaged children have access to early learning programs and supports.

9. Families must earn less than 130 percent of the poverty level, although providers have flexibility to enroll students from higher-income families at up to 10 percent of total program enrollment.

10. Learn more about President Obama’s Plan for Early Education for all Americans by visiting: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/13/fact-sheet-president-obamas-plan-early-education-all-americans-or-reading>; <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/obama-administration-2014-budget-prioritizes-key-education-investments-provide-o>.

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