

BREAKING BARRIERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PLOTING THE PATH TO
**ACADEMIC SUCCESS
FOR SCHOOL-AGE
AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES**



2008

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CONGRESSIONAL BLACK CAUCUS FOUNDATION, INC.

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Foreword

...plot a path to academic success for black males, rather than cast a spotlight on their failures.

Elsie L. Scott, Ph.D., President and CEO, Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc.

The Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc. (CBCF) is committed to creating, identifying, analyzing and disseminating policy-oriented information critical to advancing people of African descent toward equity in education. Several years ago, the CBCF Center for Policy Analysis and Research (CPAR) began dialogue about educational issues that are important to black Americans through issue forums at our Annual Legislative Conference held each fall in Washington, D.C., and district-level forums held across the country. Over the past two years, CBCF has been joined at these forums by luminaries such as Dr. Haki R. Madhubuti, author, founder of *Third World Press* and co-founder of *Betty Shabazz International Charter School*; Dr. Ronald B. Mincy, author of *Black Males Left Behind* and the late Dr. Asa G. Hilliard III, pioneering author of *Infusion of African and African American Content in the School Curriculum*. In 2006, we sponsored *Re-educating Our Community! Taking Control of Learning and Education in Our Community* at Morehouse School of Medicine (MSM) in Atlanta, Georgia. At the forum, we enjoyed commentary from MSM President Dr. John E. Maupin Jr., former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher and U.S. Rep. David Scott of Georgia. Our discussions with scholars, policymakers and other stakeholders of black education helped us to understand the exigency of meaningful research on factors that improve academic success among black males in primary, middle and high schools.

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed racially segregated schools, primarily on the premise that black students should be afforded a quality of education that is “equal” to white students, in the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Subsequent legislation to improve racial equity in education included *Title VI* of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* and *Title IX* of the *Education Amendments of 1972*, which prohibited discrimination based on race, sex and disability in federally funded educational facilities. In 1965, *Title I* of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* expanded federal aid to economically disadvantaged children.

In many ways, the language of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* reiterates the role that the federal government plays in enhancing the educational experiences of every student, regardless of race or social economic status. However, disturbing educational trends indicate a decline in positive school engagement among all males, with black males experiencing the sharpest drop. Today, African-American males have higher dropout rates, lower grade point averages and lower subsequent enrollment in institutions of higher education when compared to black females and males of other races. However, the raw data represented in studies of the “achievement gap” do little to expand our understanding of these disturbing trends.

The research presented in this report elevates the discussion of African-American males’ engagement in schools and suggests policy solutions to improve their level of academic success. Contributors to this report have been careful to focus findings on meaningful solutions, rather than recapping problems. The statistical findings in the report plot a path to academic success for black males rather than cast a spotlight on their failures. Policymakers, school administrators, advocates and activists, educators, researchers, parents and students can use the report to enhance the educational experiences of school-age African-American males.



Elsie L. Scott, Ph.D., President & CEO
Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc.

Executive Summary

Parents, teachers, researchers, school activists and policymakers agree that current educational policies inherently neglect personal, social and emotional factors that contribute to academic achievement, particularly among African-American males. Currently, less than half of black males who start high school graduate within four years, compared to 75 percent of white male students.

The present study explored factors that statistically improve educational outcomes for African-American males by analyzing academic success indicators from four national surveys: *Health Behavior in School-age Children* (HBSC: N=1225), *National Crime Victimization Survey: School Crime Supplement* (NCVS-SCS: N=849), *National Survey of America's Families* (NSAF: N=2497) and *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (NSDUH: N=1208). The domain areas explored included personal and emotional factors, family factors, social and environmental factors and school factors. Linear relationships between academic achievement and external factors are the cornerstone of the findings. A linear relationship emerges when academic achievement improved, as the level of a characteristic or asset (e.g., participation in sports or praise from teachers) increased or decreased.

In adherence to the standards for *Scientifically-based Research*, which are mandatory for application to federal educational policy and academic instruction, this research (1) applies systematic and objective procedures; (2) uses empirical and experimental methods; (3) involves robust data analyses that have the statistical power to test hypotheses and justify conclusions; (4) uses valid data and corroborates findings across multiple measurements, and (5) has been subject to peer review by independent experts. The findings will assist policymakers, educators, school advocates and families to plot the path to academic success for school-age African-American males.

The major findings of this study include:

Personal and Emotional Factors

- Quality of life, as measured by how happy the student felt about his life, was the strongest emotional predictor of academic success among school-age black males. Academically successful African-American males were almost twice as likely to report feeling happy about the quality of their life when compared to those with failing grades.
- Feeling tired in the morning and feeling lonely were additional mental health factors that significantly impaired academic functioning among black male students.
- When estimating the impact of gender, findings suggest that African-American males' academic success is more dependent upon emotional well-being than their female counterparts.
- When exploring the relationship between future plans and academic achievement, results indicated that black males who aspired to go to college were significantly more likely to perform better in school. The majority (61 percent) of the black male respondents wanted to go to college after graduation.
- Findings regarding nutrition indicated a statistical link between dietary practices and academic achievement across all races. Consumption of more healthy foods and less junk food was associated with higher academic achievement. Black students were more likely to eat junk food more frequently – and less likely to regularly eat healthy food – than Hispanic or white students.
- Eating raw vegetables was statistically associated with higher levels of academic achievement among black males.
- High-achieving black male students reported significantly more positive interactions with classmates and less

With education, I know I can go beyond my wildest dreams. With help from my teachers, family and friends – the sky is the limit!

Zaniriusz Chambers
8th Grade

*“A Mile in My Shoes” Writing Project:
African-American Males Telling Their
Own Stories*

- involvement with bullying and fighting compared to their peers.
- Although black male students significantly smoke less than white and Hispanic male students, the frequency of cigarette smoking predicted poor academic achievement better than any other psychoactive substance.

Personal and Emotional Factors: Policy Implications

Policies that emphasize mentoring programs and other means to reduce isolation among school-age African-American males are likely to improve academic progress. The findings also reinforce the need for college access programs for African-American male students, such as Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) and Upward Bound. Food policies that promote equitable access to fresh produce in African-American communities can improve academic success. Educational programs that use agricultural projects to teach students how to grow vegetables can be an effective learning tool. Educational policy that emphasizes the role of peer education and mediation, as well as character development, would support the finding that students learn best when they perceive their classmates to be supportive, accepting and agreeable. Finally, the findings support school-based drug prevention programs that encourage peer participation.

Family Factors

- African-American males with a father in the home reported higher levels of academic achievement.
- Across two national surveys (HBSC and NSDUH), African Americans were the only ethnic group to report more fatherless homes than fathers in the home. Only 20 percent to 25 percent of white students reported fatherless homes compared to 56 percent to 60 percent of black students.
- Findings produced strong evidence that modeling is an important component to academic development among black adolescent males. Father's education, but not mother's education, had a significant impact on black males' – but not as much for black females' academic achievement.
- Parents who helped their children with homework, who were comfortable talking to teachers, who urged their children to do well in school and who maintained high expectations generally had higher-performing children.

Family Factors: Policy Implications

Educational policy should increase attention to parent involvement in children's learning experiences. Tax breaks and other incentives can be given to parents who devote a certain number of hours to parent-teacher associations and volunteering at the school. Welfare-to-work and other labor and economic policies need to be examined to determine whether work values are compromising educational values. In addition, the research suggests that the lack of male models has a more profound academic impact on black male students than black female students. Current revisions of 25-year-old criminal justice policies and remedial efforts should consider the relationship between inmates and parolees and their children. Funding for fatherhood programs and mentoring programs is supported by the current findings. In addition, healthy marriage initiatives, which help black people to understand the material and immaterial value of marriage and family, are important in developing a culture that is more conducive to academic success. The high number of African-American males who are being raised in homes without fathers increases the need for policies to support parent cooperation programs.

Social and Environmental Factors

- African-American males who were reared in homes with more financial resources had better odds of performing well in school. African Americans are more likely to live in poverty than any other racial group. African Americans also had the greatest wealth gap, suggesting that their finances are more sensitive to national economic trends.
- Black students in urban environments had significantly higher levels of academic achievement when compared with black students in rural environments.
- Involvement in the juvenile-justice system greatly impairs academic achievement among black males. African-American males are more likely to spend time in jail or a detention center than any other race. Young black

- males are involved in the juvenile justice system at twice the rate of white males.
- School-based activities, especially sports, had the strongest impact on academic achievement. Time spent using computers also predicted high achievement among black male students.

Social and Environment Factors: Policy Implications

Educational policies should consider the natural social disadvantages that students might have from low-income homes, by supplementing schools in impoverished areas with resources to build and maintain school-based activities. In addition, policymakers should encourage research to better understand the challenges and identify supports for African-American students in rural areas. Juvenile justice policies should be examined to reduce the frequency and burden of jail and detention center involvement among black males. NCLB mandates for educational standards in juvenile detention centers should be followed to minimize academic distractions. Problems associated with the “digital divide” should be addressed within the current scope of educational policy. Volunteering and religious activity also appear to be important social reinforcers of educational values. Community service for class credit at public high schools could help black men gain a more secure investment in the educational process.

School Factors

- “Liking” school and not being “bored” by school appears to be language that is particularly salient to school-adaptive patterns for black males. Two national surveys (HBSC and NSDUH) demonstrated that the more black males report that they like school, and the less they report being bored by school, the better their educational outcomes.
- Across three national surveys (HBSC, NSDUH and NCVS-SCS), the profile of a teacher that was particularly effective in fostering academic growth among black males emerged as teachers who were interested in their students “as a person,” treated them fairly, encouraged them to express their views and gave extra help when needed. Teachers who were effective also routinely let their students know when they did a good job.
- Black male students perform best in environments that they perceive as safe. High-achieving black male students reported more often that they feel safe at school. Low-achieving black male students were more likely to carry a weapon to school for self-defense than middle- or high-achieving black male students.
- Current school safety measures explored in this study did not have a relationship to academic achievement among African-American students. When comparing school safety measures by race, findings indicate that schools that educate black students devoted a disproportionate amount of resources to metal detectors and security officers. A black student is almost 500 percent more likely to pass through a metal detector than a white student. However, black students were significantly more likely than white or Hispanic students to feel unsafe at school.

School Factors: Policy Implications

Project-based learning, inquiry-based science, student-centered learning, inclusive multicultural education, critical pedagogy and anti-oppressive education are educational strategies that are consistent with the findings and should be incorporated into revised educational policy. The findings suggest that teachers are most effective when they have a personal connection to their students. When educational policies outline criteria for teacher and teaching standards, schools should measure holistic teacher qualities including: (1) abilities to make students feel supported and respected; (2) skill at creating forums for students to express themselves and (3) ability to critique students without making them feel bad about themselves. Programs should be implemented to instill a spirit of activism among diverse educators by equipping them with the tools necessary to influence educational and social policy. Safety is a factor that is uniquely related to academic success among school-age black males. School policies should view safety as an internal state that is sensitive to a nurturing environment.

About the Author

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Breaking Barriers: Plotting the Path to Academic Success for School-age African American Males provides a fresh perspective and in-depth analysis of the social, emotional and cognitive factors that contribute to African-American male students' well being and school success. The report recommends policy advocacy that supports educational equity and holistic opportunities to learn – the centerpiece of which is access to quality teachers and supportive learning environments.

Leslie Fenwick, Ph.D., Dean
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