

African-American Males in Policy Spotlight

An African-American teenager recently told William R. Hite, Jr., the incoming schools superintendent in Philadelphia, that there are more adults working in his high school who could arrest him than could help him fill out applications for college financial aid.


That story, shared Monday with an audience of educators, advocates, and state and federal policymakers, punctuated an issue of increasing concern: the persistent vulnerability of black boys.

In America's public schools, African-American males are the least likely to read on grade level, most likely to be suspended or expelled, most likely to be referred to special education, and most likely to drop out, numerous studies have shown. This bleak portrait of black boys' chances for future success came into sharp relief as educators and advocates met in Washington to look for solutions and capitalize on momentum created by President Obama's establishment of a [new White House initiative](#) to focus on the educational achievement of African-Americans. The Council of the Great City Schools, a Washington-based advocacy group for the nation's urban school systems, and the U.S. Department of Education co-hosted a day-long national summit to highlight solutions to black boys' high dropout and suspension rates, low grades and test scores, and lackluster college-going and completion rates.

"On every indicator of progress, black males are underrepresented," said Mr. Hite, who is wrapping up his tenure as superintendent in Maryland's Prince George's County schools before taking the helm of Philadelphia's schools Oct. 1. "And on every indicator that suggests a problem, black males are overrepresented." Mr. Hite was among more than a dozen educators and scholars who spoke at the summit.

Solution Oriented

The council commissioned a series of "solutions briefs" from prominent scholars with expertise spanning from early childhood to higher education, and drafted a "blueprint" that outlines concrete policies and action steps for school districts to take to improve outcomes for black boys. Those range from creating interventions for black boys who show early signs of academic troubles and closely monitoring the rigor of instruction and content they receive to using aggressive recruitment strategies to hire more African-American males as teachers.

The plight of African-American boys in schools has, in the last decade, sparked an impassioned group of advocates to push for solutions. For example, the [Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color](#)—a network of single-gender schools—formed to push for schools that are specifically designed to serve African-American and Latino males on the assumption that the best way to serve such students is to separate them. The Council of the Great City Schools brought attention to the issue in 2010 when it issued a [report](#)  documenting the grim educational attainment of black boys in urban schools and called for a White House summit.

The creation of the [White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans](#) earlier this summer, though, is bringing an even higher profile to the struggles of black boys,

advocates say. The Congressional Black Caucus has pushed for such an effort for more than a decade, said U.S. Rep. Danny K. Davis, D-Illinois.

“This has to be a national priority,” he said.

But with the presidential election just two months away, it’s not clear that the effort, announced in July, will even have much opportunity to get underway. The White House has not yet named an executive director. Freeman A. Hrabowski III, the president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and the chair of a presidential advisory commission on African-American educational opportunities, said during yesterday’s summit that staff members for the initiative would not be selected until later this year or early next year. That timing raises serious questions about the initiative’s longevity if President Obama is not reelected.

But the summit focused tightly on solutions that would not be contingent on the outcome of a presidential election. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan moderated a panel where educators talked about strategies they are using to help black boys.

Mary Skipper, the principal of TechBoston Academy in the Dorchester section of Boston, said her school has aggressively sought out African-American male teachers to teach Advanced Placement and other high-level courses, among several other strategies.

“Having black males in front of the classroom matters,” she said. Ms. Skipper also said that simply having higher expectations for black boys is “useless” without highly effective supports for them. TechBoston uses peer tutors, small classes with multiple opportunities to do group work, and a discipline policy that uses out-of-school suspension in rare cases.

Peer mentoring is also essential, said Randolph Scott, an 18-year-old freshman at Fayetteville State University, a historically black institution in North Carolina. “To be a young black male, there is no one else who can understand me like another young black male,” he said.

Mr. Hite said breaking down school system barriers is also critical. Just six years ago, Prince George’s, where 80 percent of the student body is African-American, only 15 percent of the students enrolled in Advanced Placement and other high-level, college-preparatory courses were black.

“What message does that send to our young people about our expectations for them?” he said.

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