



Illustrations
by James O'Brien
for The Chronicle

Black Males Aren't Failing Our Schools. Our Schools Are Failing Them.

By IVORY A. TOLDSON

WE NEED to “shift the focus from ‘Why are young black males failing?’ to ‘Why are schools failing young black males?’”

That was the tweet I posted on October 2. In response, Cato June, a noted high-school football coach and former professional player, wrote: “Not sure that they are. Kids don’t show up. Schools can’t fail them if they aren’t there.”

Then ensued a Twitter conversation among us and Rhonda Bryant, author of the report “Uneven Ground: Examining Systemic Inequities That Block College Preparation for African American Boys.”

Bryant and I contended that racial inequities in schools result directly in black boys’ failing to live up to their academic potential. Specifically, we drew from our analyses of the “Civil Rights Data Collection,” which shows that high schools with the largest percentage of black students systemat-

ically omit advanced math and science classes, use more-punitive disciplinary policies, have higher student-to-counselor ratios, more often have teachers who are not qualified to teach their assigned courses, and more frequently rely on substitute teachers.

But June argued that black boys need a system of strict accountability, and that making excuses for their failure is, itself, inexcusable. The school has the responsibility to teach the child, he said, and the child has the responsibility to seek education. Inspiring the child to want to learn is not the school’s responsibility. June also cited some common explanations for underachievement: disengaged parents, more interest in video games than in college readiness, and so on.

I accused June of abdicating his responsibility to fight for educational equality and instead simply teaching young black men that they need to adjust to inequality. But we suspended the debate civilly, with an invitation for me to visit his school, in the Ana-

costia area of Washington, D.C.

June’s attitude is ubiquitous. Society condemns the families and communities of the ostensibly endangered black male growing up in a broken home within a crime-ridden, drug-infested neighborhood. That view lets the rest of us off the hook, right? When these communities start holding up their end of the bargain, we’ll hold up ours.

But that’s shortsighted and inaccurate. There’s plenty going right with these resilient young men, but we’re often not giving them the tools they need to thrive.

CONTRARY to popular belief, black males are not underrepresented in institutions of higher education. Today the 12.7 million black men who are 18 and older account for 5.5 percent of the U.S. adult population. The 76.4 million white men of that age range account for 32.7 percent. According to the 2010 census, the 1.2 million black male college students are

5.5 percent of all college students, and the 5.6 million white male students are 27 percent. Those proportions suggest that black men are more adequately represented in higher education than white men are.

However, black men are overrepresented at community colleges (529,000; 43 percent). An additional 132,000 (11 percent) attend for-profit universities.

In the current environment, even the most gifted African-American students, with the most dedicated parents, can leave high school underprepared and have trouble getting into four-year colleges.

The Department of Education’s second “Civil Rights Data Collection” report, released this year, suggests that opportunity gaps between black and white males exist in three key areas:

- Schools with largely black student populations routinely offer a less rigorous curriculum, omitting classes required for college admission.
- Schools discipline black males more harshly, suspending them for

behaviors, like tardiness, that rarely result in suspensions for white males.

■ Black students disproportionately have the lowest-paid teachers with the fewest years of classroom experience. Many of those become teachers through alternative teacher-certification programs.

In a national survey conducted by the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, 87 percent of black students in ninth grade in 2009 were in 11th grade by 2012. About 64 percent of black male students in high school expect to eventually graduate from college. However, black students are behind their peers in the proportion taking college-preparatory classes. For instance, 53 percent of Asian students, 24 percent of white students, 16 percent of Hispanic students, and 12 percent of black students were taking precalculus or calculus by the 11th grade.

What's more, systemic inequities prevent black males from being properly advised to attend colleges that best match their academic potential.

Recently I heard Michelle Obama talk about the anger she felt when her guidance counselor tried to persuade her not to apply to Princeton. Her counselor told her it was too competitive for someone with her background. The ambitious young woman set out to

prove that counselor wrong, and did.

I also watched a documentary called *A Tale of Two Schools*. At a predominantly white public high school on Long Island, N.Y., the guidance counselor tells a student that he needs a "reach" school. Only a few miles away, at a predominantly black public high school, a black guidance counselor convinces a black student with a B average that he needs to apply to a "safe" school—that is, a community college.

During a professional-development workshop, I showed a video clip of a young black man describing his feelings of anxiety and despondency when he is greeted by "mean looking" security officers at a high school, has to pass through a metal detector, and encounters teachers who seem like they "don't want to be there." A high-school administrator who watched the clip shrugged her shoulders and said, "He needs to tell his friends to stop bringing weapons to the school." Note that she did not know the student in the video.

Such attitudes are built on stereotype, hyperbole, and conjecture, not a meaningful interpretation of the data and a compassionate understanding of students' experiences. Worse, these attitudes tend to reinforce systemic inequities.

Programs like Race to the Top and My Brother's Keeper encourage

efforts that expand curricular offerings, bring experienced teachers to high-poverty schools, establish cooperative agreements between high schools and colleges, and improve schools' cultural sensitivity.

Here are recommendations from "Challenge the Status Quo," a report I helped write that was published in 2012 by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation in cooperation with other groups. The suggestions, based on the best research available, should help school administrators and community advocates promote college attainment among black males:

■ Eliminate staff members' biases, stereotypes, and misinformation. Schools should operate under the philosophy that all black males are capable of the highest levels of academic achievement.

■ Offer a curriculum that, at a minimum, meets the admissions requirements for the most competitive public university of your state. Schools and their governing districts should provide a statement to parents or guardians disclosing whether or not such courses are offered.

■ Train teachers about cultural customs and differences, empathy and respect, classroom management, and other relevant topics.

■ Monitor and reduce suspensions. Replace a rigid focus on discipline

with a focus on academics and student agency. Have a clear and transparent suspension policy, with a process for students to appeal.

■ Monitor collective student progress. Safe and productive schools work to have a collective GPA higher than 3.0, have close to 100 percent of their students involved in extracurricular activities, have at least 25 percent of their black males in honors classes or some type of enhanced curriculum, have less than 6 percent of black male students in special education, and suspend fewer than 10 percent of their black male students for any reason.

■ Work with parents. Supportive schools provide information on how to help children learn at home, on child development, on community services to help their children, and on course content and learning goals. Such schools offer opportunities for parents to volunteer and updates on student progress between report cards.

Given the inequalities they face, African-American boys and men have proved their resilience and drive. Imagine what they could do if given the resources they deserve. ■

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