Educating and Motivating African American Males to Succeed

Antoine M. Garibaldi, Xavier University of Louisiana

One of the most actively discussed, and sometimes vigorously debated, issues since the late 1980s has been the declining social, economic, and educational status of young African American males in our society. The negative indicators that describe a substantial share of this group’s depressing condition in unemployment statistics, homicide rates (as both victims and perpetrators), their overwhelmingly disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system, as well as their last-place ranking on many measures of educational performance and attainment have become so commonplace that it has caused many to view the majority of these young men’s futures as hopeless and impossible to salvage.

Even if one doubts that a “crisis” truly exists or questions whether African American males may one day become an “endangered species,” few systematic solutions have been offered to address realistically the problems that at least one-third of young Black men experience. Many conferences, symposia, and workshops have been held over the last few years (and I confess that I have been a participant in some of those meetings), but too much of our time has been devoted to discussing the plight of African American males rather than developing potential solutions to mitigate this crisis. Remedies do exist, and this article highlights some educational solutions developed more than four years ago which might reverse the negative trends that have become widely associated with African American males.

The New Orleans Public School Study on Black Males

My own involvement with this topic began in 1987 when I was asked by the New Orleans Public School System to chair a task force of community leaders and educators to review the status of African American males in that city’s schools. The specific charge of the committee was to examine the rates of school retention, suspension, expulsion, academic achievement, grade attainment, school attendance and participation in co-curricular activities by African American male students, since it had become obvious that these young men were rarely represented among the school system’s honor roll recipients and yet were disproportionately represented in almost all categories of academic failure. As typically happens when committees such as these are established, much of our initial meeting time was spent discussing “the problem” and offering possible
solutions without any hard facts or data to support them. Thus, we
decided that the previous school year's data on the relevant indicators
should be assembled and analyzed so that we could use that information
to develop our own surveys of students, teachers, parents, and the
general public. Further, we agreed to have four public hearings whereby
citizens could offer their own suggestions about what should be done to
address these widespread educational problems. With this comprehen-
sive information in hand we believed that we would then be in a better
position to make sound recommendations based on fact rather than
anecdotal and unsubstantiated perceptions. While no deadline was given
for submitting a final report, the committee worked for an entire school
year and developed recommendations consistent with the results of the
previous school year's data, the surveys of students, teachers, parents,
and the public, as well as the testimony of local citizens.1

The analyses of the 1986–87 school year's data not only verified the
committee's beliefs but the results were also quite startling. In an urban
school system where 87% of the 86,000 students were African American,
we found that African American males accounted for 58% of the nonpro-
motions, 65% of the suspensions, 80% of the expulsions, and 45% of the
dropouts—even though these young men represented only 43% of the
school population. The picture for African American females in the school
system was somewhat less bleak, but still of concern. These young
women represented 44% of the school population but accounted for 34%
of the nonpromotions, 29% of the suspensions, 20% of the expulsions,
and 41% of the dropouts. It was also very disconcerting to find that more
than 800 of the 1,470 nonpromotions in the first grade and more than
1,600 of the almost 2,800 nonpromotions in the sixth through eighth
grades were African American males.

With respect to academic achievement, we also found that one-third
of African American males and females in New Orleans' public schools
scored in the lowest quartile on the reading and mathematics sections of
the California Test of Basic Skills. Only 18% of the African American
males and 20% of the females scored in the highest quartile on the
mathematics component of the test, and only 16% of females and 13% of
males scored in the highest quartile on the reading test. The only
bright spot from the New Orleans study's analysis of the academic
achievement of its African American students was that roughly one-third
of the males scored at or above the mean on both sections of the test.

Since this study was conducted in 1987–88, other school systems,
most notably Prince Georges County (MD) and Milwaukee (WI), have
replicated the findings of poor academic performance for African Ameri-
can males. The results in Prince Georges County showed that the perfor-
mance of Black males and females on criterion-referenced tests in both
mathematics and reading was comparable to that of White students up

1The complete final report of this study, Educating Black Male Youth: A Moral and Civic
Imperative, is available from the New Orleans Public Schools, Office of the Superintendent,
4100 Touro Street, New Orleans, Louisiana 70122, for a nominal charge of $3.00. It is also
available through ERIC (ED 303 546) and on microfiche.
to third grade. By grade four, however, Black males experienced a sharp decline on criterion-referenced mathematics and reading tests. Moreover, the percentage of Black males in the top reading group among 18 Prince Georges County elementary schools dropped significantly from grade four to grade six. In the first and fourth grades, 23% of the African American males were in the top reading group, but by grade six only 12% were in the top groups (Simmons & Grady, 1990).

In Milwaukee during the 1988–89 school year, the percentage of African American males scoring at or above the national average on the norm-referenced test in reading dropped from 28% in second grade to 24% in grades five and seven (African American Male Task Force, 1990). On the norm-referenced mathematics test, 45% of the Black males scored at or above the national average in second grade. That proportion dropped to 33% in grade five and to 22% in grade seven. Black females in Milwaukee also experienced the same declining score trends on norm-referenced reading and mathematics tests. In reading, the percentage of Black girls scoring at or above the national average declined from 34% in grade two to 22% in grade five, but then rose sharply, to 30%, in grade seven. In mathematics, 45% of African American girls scored at or above the national mean in the second grade, 37% did so in the fifth grade, while the percentage dropped down to 26% in grade seven.

A national decline in performance on mathematics and reading tests for African American students around grade four is clearly evident, and further study is needed to identify the critical factors that are causing this phenomenon. These adverse trends in reading performance, particularly for Black males and females, have been verified by analyses of national assessments by Winfield (1988) and Winfield and Lee (1990), who note that minority females outscore their male counterparts to a greater degree than do White females vis-à-vis White males on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading tests.

All the above results clearly demonstrate that the academic failure of African American males (and also females but apparently not as rapidly) begins early and eventually leads to these youths becoming disinterested in school and some even dropping out before they reach senior high school. This has become quite apparent in college enrollment rates as well: African American female undergraduates outnumbered African American males by more than 240,000 in 1988 (Carter & Wilson, 1991). Nevertheless, systematic solutions can be implemented to address these problems, but it is first important to learn what the educational expectations and interests of the school system's African American male students are and how their teachers and parents perceive them and their ambitions.

**Student, Teacher, and Parental Perceptions**

Contrary to public perception, African American boys do want to finish school and many want to be challenged academically. In our survey of more than 2,250 African American males in the New Orleans school district, 95% reported that they expected to graduate from high school. However, 40% responded that they believed their teachers did not set
high enough goals for them, and 60% suggested that their teachers should push them harder. (Black females in the study responded similarly to the boys on these items.) However, when we surveyed a random sample of 500 teachers (318 of whom responded) and asked them if they believed their Black male students would go to college, almost 6 out of every 10 teachers responded in the negative. This is even more troubling because 60% of the teachers sampled taught in elementary schools, 70% of them had 10 or more years of experience, and 65% of them were Black! This disconcerting response lends added support to the teacher expectancy literature and confirms that no teachers are immune from holding negative, self-fulfilling prophecies about the children they teach.

While students’ aspirations and their assessments of the education they were receiving did not coincide well with the perceptions of some teachers, parental beliefs were more similar to those of their children. Parents did not share the teachers’ beliefs with respect to their sons’ postsecondary interests. Eight out of every 10 of the 3,523 parents surveyed indicated that they believed their sons expected to go to college (compared to 4 out of 10 teachers who believed similarly). However, one-fourth of those parents also responded that they had never gone to their child’s school for parental conferences during which report cards are usually given out and children’s performance in classes is discussed. Because some parents do not (or cannot) attend parental conferences, it is very likely that some teachers may misinterpret parental absenteeism as a sign that the children of these parents are not interested in finishing school or do not have positive educational aspirations. This may further confirm teachers’ skepticism regarding African American male children’s futures in particular. Given the latter possibility as well as the large perception gap that apparently exists between parents’ and teachers’ appraisals of African American males’ educational expectations and aspirations, more must be done to increase the amount and quality of communication between parents and teachers to minimize incorrect interpretations about these students’ motivation and desire to succeed academically.

**Solutions and Recommendations**

To alleviate this expanding problem, systematic solutions are needed and more must be done to motivate, encourage, and reinforce more young Black men to perform well in the classroom. While negative peer pressure tends to diminish African American males’ propensity to succeed academically, that influence can be reduced, if not entirely eliminated, by verbally and materially rewarding academic achievement in the same way that society acknowledges and even extols athletic performance. When we publicly recognize the successful academic experiences of young African American men, we simultaneously raise their self-concept, self-esteem, and academic confidence. Negative peer pressure, specifically the invective that African American students are “acting White” if they strive to achieve academically (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), is a major deterrent to many non-White students’ school performance. External influences that affect children’s dispositions toward learning
must be addressed by schools and teachers so that students who do perform at or above average are not ostracized, ridiculed, intimidated, physically assaulted, or belittled by their peers. More must be done by parents, communities, the media, and educators to minimize the social and psychological stresses that academically talented African American students must confront on a daily basis.

Teachers have a pivotal role to play in reversing the negative academic and social behaviors of African American males; but they, too, are susceptible to internalizing and projecting the negative stereotypes and myths that are unfairly used to describe African American males as a monolithic group with little hope of surviving and being successful. Teachers who ascribe to such beliefs, therefore, must change their subjective attitudes about Black boys' ability to succeed. The fact that many African American males do succeed in schools makes this issue even more important. Teachers who hold negative perceptions can inadvertently "turn off" Black male students who have high abilities, positive self-concepts, and outstanding personal expectations, and who set achievable aspirations. Teachers, therefore, must challenge these young men intellectually and, when possible, provide them with immediate, continuous, and appropriate reinforcement as well as positive feedback for their academic accomplishments. Their encouragement can significantly enhance for all students the importance and value of education for long-term financial and personal success, but especially so for Black male youths.

Recognizing that teachers alone cannot be expected to raise the achievement and aspirations of African American male children, the parents of these young men must motivate, encourage and reinforce their sons so that they will use their talents and ability to perform successfully in the classroom. Parents must acknowledge and/or reward their sons' academic accomplishments; they must require that they do homework; they must emphasize the value of learning; and they must meet and consult with their sons' teachers to find out how they are performing in school and to be apprised of areas in which their sons need assistance. Even more importantly, parents of African American boys must monitor the courses their sons are taking and support their aspirations to go to college in the same way they encourage their female children.

Many parents, however, especially those who themselves have little education, will need help from schools, teachers, and the community to accomplish the above recommendations. Just as some students are ostracized for doing well in school by their peers, so, too, are some parents intimidated by teachers for asking questions about their sons' performance and/or behavior in the classroom. Teachers, therefore, must be taught during their undergraduate training or in staff development sessions how to communicate with these parents. For example, they should be instructed how to convey to them, in layman's language, the results of children's performance on standardized tests. Teacher candidates should also learn what kinds of helpful suggestions they can give to these parents to enhance their sons' academic performance or participation in school activities.

Teachers must make a serious effort to tell parents about their children's academic strengths as well as weaknesses. Such balanced evalua-
tions give teachers the opportunity to suggest to parents ways in which their sons might develop better study skills and be more constructive in their uses of time after school. Emphasizing these children’s positive characteristics, even when their abilities are below average, is a very constructive way of demonstrating to parents their role in encouraging, assisting, and monitoring more closely the academic performance of their sons (Garibaldi, 1992). The apparent perception gap that exists about Black male students’ abilities among teachers, parents, and students must be reduced, and this can only be achieved through more cooperation, communication, and understanding among all three groups.

While it is not possible here to list all the more than 50 recommendations from the New Orleans Public Schools study, below are a few which the committee proposed as well as some of the suggestions obtained from citizens who testified at the public hearings. These suggestions are not listed in any order of priority but are merely illustrative of the range of strategies recommended for teachers, students, parents, the general public, and the business community. Again, they are beneficial for all youth, but special attention is given to the educational needs of African American males:

1. African American male students should be taught values, etiquette, and morality at school and in the home. They should also be taught why they should resist peer pressure and why success in school must be reinforced.

2. African American male students should be strongly encouraged to participate in more extracurricular activities that are related to academics and leadership (such as academic clubs, yearbook staffs, debate teams, student councils, safety patrols, and so forth) and not just athletics.

3. African American male students who perform well in school should also receive recognition and tangible rewards (e.g., letter jackets, sweaters, etc.) comparable to that given to athletes and barbershop choruses.

4. African American male college students should perform community service at local elementary and secondary schools as tutors, teacher aides, speakers, or assistants to extracurricular sponsors. Their positive role modeling and mentoring can have a tremendous impact on young boys, both those who are succeeding as well as those who are not, and can further underscore for these youth the importance of doing well in the classroom.

5. Various segments of the community such as the media, businesspersons, religious leaders, public servants, senior citizens, retired professionals, skilled craftsmen, and members of social and civic organizations should also volunteer to assist schools on a regular and ongoing basis as tutors, speakers, resource persons, and counselors. These individuals and groups can emphasize the importance of values, the work ethic, the appreciation of culture and the arts, and many other topics to which young African American males need to be exposed.

6. Teachers should strongly encourage their African American male students in the earliest grades to pursue college or postsecondary
training. Visitations to colleges or vocational/trade schools, career day programs, and guest speakers representing white- and blue-collar careers are some examples of how Black male youth can be exposed to advanced educational and career opportunities.

(7) More African American male elementary teachers and social workers should be hired and, where possible, assigned as counselors to elementary schools. A short-term strategy which might be utilized is the hiring and/or recruiting of African American males as teacher aides or volunteer aides in the lower grades. Peer counselors from junior and senior highs can benefit both younger as well as older African American male students.

(8) Businesses should consider allowing release or compensatory time for their African American employees who are parents so they can attend schools for meetings and report card conferences. African American parents of elementary-age children should be allowed leave from their jobs to visit their children’s schools at least one day during the school year.

(9) Businesses might also provide rewards and incentives (e.g., summer jobs, tangible forms of recognition, etc.) to the children of their employees who maintain above-average grades, attend school daily, and participate in extracurricular activities. These kinds of reinforcement and rewards will not only help students to excel in school but they will also encourage parents to promote their children’s education.

(10) Teachers must help to show their African American male students the relevance and applicability of coursework to one’s adult years by incorporating family living skills into social studies curricula, introducing family budgeting concepts into mathematics lessons, and emphasizing business and job-related communication and writing skills instruction into language arts and English classes.

The majority of the above recommendations are reasonable, realistic, and easy to implement. Moreover, little funding is necessary within schools and within school districts to employ many of the strategies suggested. However, these approaches can significantly boost the self-concept, self-esteem, and academic achievement of all school-aged youth and especially African American males. If we expect to substantially alleviate the adverse conditions faced by many Black males and improve their life chances, strong commitment and leadership are essential. We must begin by improving the educational performance and attainment of African American boys. When they succeed the educational performance of others will also be raised, and the adage, “a rising tide lifts all boats,” will be realized.

REFERENCES


