



## About this Memorandum

For far too long, the academic achievement levels of African American students have been lower than average, despite an abundance of research on the topic and examples of best practices in communities across the nation. This memorandum was developed to advance the critical mission of the [President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for African Americans](#).

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Charles H. Houston Center for the Study of the Black Experience in Education, Clemson University  
Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color  
Council of the Great City Schools  
Frontline Solutions  
National Transitional Jobs Network at Heartland Alliance  
Scholars Network on Black Masculinity  
The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity  
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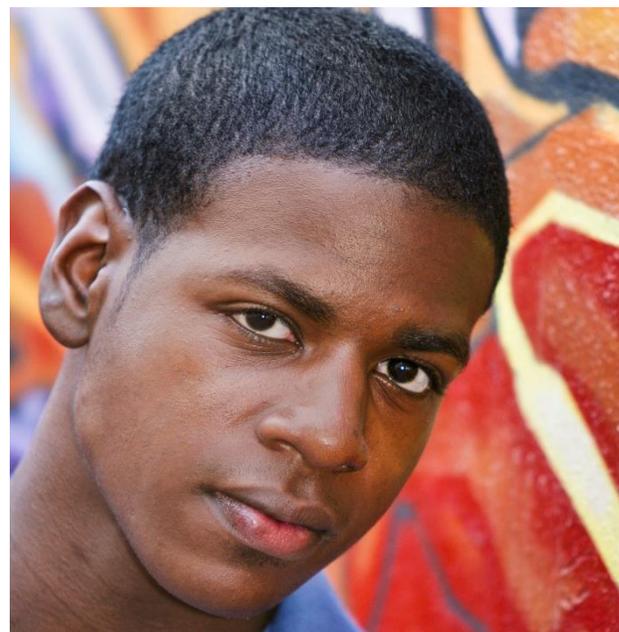
The current state of low academic achievement among a large majority of African American students is complex. While the U.S. has long professed that a world-class education is the right of every child, there are still major inequities in the education system that leave African American children with fewer opportunities to receive a quality education throughout the educational pipeline (elementary, secondary, and postsecondary). African American students have fewer high-quality teachers, less resourced schools, fewer gifted programs, and limited access to college preparatory coursework. These inequities are further complicated by issues of poverty and geography. For African American students, reduced and constrained access to educational opportunities begins in the early years and persists throughout the PreK-12 education system and beyond.

There are several points throughout the education pipeline where African American students are lost. Knowing these points of loss presents an opportunity to be strategic and deliberate with our investments in African American children and youth.

1. **The first opportunity is in the early years.** African American children are less likely to have high-quality early care and education that prepares them for kindergarten. This early gap often sets the stage for years of academic struggle. By ensuring high-quality early care and education from birth, we strengthen their starting point and ensure African Americans begin school prepared.
2. **The second opportunity is third grade.** While strong reading and numeracy skills form the basis for all future learning, too few African American students possess these skills at this point in their education.
3. **The third opportunity is middle school.** At this stage of the educational pipeline, poor school attendance, behavior, and course completion are strongly correlated with high school dropout. By identifying and providing supportive services to African American middle school students, their

likelihood of prematurely withdrawing from high school before obtaining a diploma is greatly reduced.

4. **The fourth opportunity is ninth grade.** The transition into high school is important and leaves many students feeling overwhelmed. Ninth grade is the point at which students are most likely to drop out of high school. Supporting the ninth grade transition and making high school a positive experience is critical to keeping African American students connected to school.
5. **The fifth opportunity is recovering high school dropouts.** Despite positive steps taken to reduce the incidence of dropout among African American students over the past decade, their dropout rates remain high. Students who drop out of school are still the school system's responsibility, and school districts should be charged with re-engaging these students in quality educational alternatives that will lead to a high school diploma or secondary credential.
6. **The sixth opportunity is the transition into postsecondary education.** This transition is critical for African American students, especially those who come from low-income communities and may require additional social, emotional, and financial supports to thrive both academically and socially.



## Focus on Secondary and Postsecondary School Transitions

Middle school is a critical fork in the road for many African American youth. Research shows that poor middle school experiences are a strong predictor of dropout. Additionally, students who fail mathematics and reading, students who are absent for more than 30 days in a school year, and students who are repeatedly suspended are all at significantly greater risk.<sup>i</sup> Moreover, students who experience trauma have negative outcomes that impact their healthy development and learning.<sup>ii</sup> African American students disproportionately grapple with each of these issues. While students may continue to attend school, their disengagement is already evident in these years. Intervening before they drop out is critical, as it is easier to keep them than to reengage them afterwards.

Similar to middle school, the high school years require special attention. The majority of students who drop out of high school do so between ninth and tenth grade.<sup>iii</sup> Supports during this transition time are critical. Reimagining the high school experience to more effectively prepare African American students for college and careers requires a shift in how we think about place, time, teaching, and learning. Students need to be

A continuum approach is needed to effectively address issues of achievement for African American students. We cannot invest in just one point of the educational pipeline and expect it to yield transformative results down the road. Historically, we have seen waves of investments in select points of the educational pipeline rather than consistent funding across the different educational junctures. We now know that large investments only in early childhood or only in third grade reading have not yielded the long-term results we desire, particularly in high-poverty communities. We cannot close the equity gaps in some areas and not in others and still expect students to be more successful. For the purposes of our work, we have chosen to focus on youth and young adults because these are the age groups that have been most under-resourced historically and because success at that stage of life is critical to postsecondary achievement, career success, and positive life outcomes.

challenged academically but should be extended the opportunity to explore their interests and be exposed to postsecondary environments and careers. Efforts to reform our high schools, including the Obama Administration's High School Redesign initiative, should be intentionally inclusive of the needs of African American students, particularly those in poverty. The traditional high school experience works for some students but fails others, especially those in poverty who may face many external challenges to completing their education. The high school experience also fails to connect appropriately with postsecondary expectations or industry needs.

As we consider high school reforms, we must ensure those who do drop out of school are not lost. They are still our students, our responsibility. We have an obligation to recapture them and reengage them in education. Students who do not graduate from high school have an unemployment rate of 11.1 percent, 4.8 percentage points higher than those with some college or an associate degree.<sup>iv</sup> The estimated average lifetime earnings for a high school dropout are \$1.198 million, 47 percent less than those of an individual with a bachelor's degree.<sup>v</sup> Failing to ensure all students graduate from high school has significant economic consequences for the U.S.—creating an under-skilled workforce, increasing the need for social service supports, and reducing tax revenue. The Obama Administration has taken [promising steps towards](#) addressing the needs of this population, but the resources and policies proposed are insufficient to address these issues to scale.

### **School safety and connectedness are key factors that impact education outcomes**

School safety and climate are extremely important in middle and high school. Students cannot be expected to focus on their academics if they fear for or are concerned about their safety and well-being during school or on their way to and from school. Nationally, African American students are more likely than white students to have missed a day of school in the last month because they feel unsafe. African American students are also more likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon than their

white peers.<sup>vi</sup> There are clear differences in school climate between predominantly African American and white schools that need to be addressed. And while it is often not acknowledged, there is an even greater disparity *within* each school. Within the same building, disadvantaged minority students, especially males, are not having the same school experience as their peers. This underscores the need to focus heavily on change within individual schools or their surrounding areas. Both school administrators and staff are in a position to remedy this gap through their building-level policies and practices.

School connectedness is another important factor throughout the educational pipeline. Students are more connected to their learning when supported by teachers and staff who are caring and have high expectations for their achievement. These supports are linked to multiple positive academic, personal, and health outcomes.<sup>vii</sup> When students feel supported and accountable to an adult who cares, they are even more connected to school. This connectedness tends to enhance school attendance and performance. It also reduces their involvement in health-risk behaviors that are barriers to learning.

Schools do not have the capacity to address these issues alone. Eliminating the educational inequities facing African Americans requires an all-hands-on-deck approach that engages multiple stakeholders in students' overall healthy development. This approach is paramount for students living in high-poverty communities. Communities should be seen as partners with schools; this includes parents and families, business and industry, youth-serving systems, and community-based organizations focused on a range of issues impacting poverty and mobility. These partners can advocate with and on behalf of students to hold educators accountable for students' development and help schools set benchmarks for educational achievement.

## Recognize socio-emotional health as an underlying factor in education outcomes for African American youth

Youth who have underlying mental health problems (e.g., depression) have poorer academic and social outcomes in school. African American youth, particularly those living in poverty, endure many traumatic experiences that impact their mental health. The circumstances of concentrated poverty, in particular, present a host of issues that lead to impaired social-emotional health. As the most likely racial group to live in concentrated poverty, African American children suffer more frequently than their peers from stressors such as violence, abuse, unemployment, racism, lack of adequate health care, and social isolation. A young person's social-emotional health impacts the way they see themselves and their position in or worth to the world, as well as their ability to think about future life goals. This has major implications for the young person's academic achievement. There are a number of school-based strategies for supporting social-emotional wellness and healing that are yielding successful outcomes for African American male youth. In addition, coordinating support for young people's care and wellness across multiple social-service agencies will help youth tremendously and enable them to engage more productively in learning.

## Understand and train teachers, counselors, and youth workers to develop culturally responsive pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy is when teachers, youth workers, counselors, and others develop the knowledge, skills, and predispositions necessary to educate children from diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. It is especially critical for adults supporting the holistic development of African American youth to understand this concept. Good multicultural teaching honors the country's diverse cultural and ethnic experiences, contributions, and identities; it emphasizes the need for teachers and other adults who work with students to understand the experiences and perspectives students bring to educational settings and be responsive to the cultures of different groups in designing curricula,

learning activities, classroom climate, instructional materials and techniques, and assessment procedures.<sup>viii</sup>

Identified in this memorandum are thematic areas that we hope the *President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for African Americans* will address in the coming months. This is not intended to be a full discussion of each issue. Instead, these areas are presented as starting points for your discussions.

## Advance solutions for naming, increasing understanding, and addressing implicit bias in education

Implicit bias is still a tremendous challenge in our country. These unconscious preconceptions are formed by our experiences and help shape our attitudes, decision-making, and behaviors. In the area of education, implicit racial biases toward African American students can lead to negative academic outcomes.

Teachers' implicit biases can influence their interactions with students and expectations of student achievement.<sup>ix</sup> These differential expectations in achievement can also drive placement into special education and gifted education programs. This phenomenon is evidenced in the large disparities in these programs reported in the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). Similarly, teachers' expectations of student behavior can play a role in school discipline disparities, as evidenced by far higher rates of school suspension and expulsion for African American boys. The unconscious racial and gender biases of police officers have particular importance for African American students, especially when considering the use of School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools. Implicit biases, such as those that associate Black males with traits such as aggression, violence, and criminality, can impact perceptions and treatment of African American students. CRDC data from the 2009-10 academic year indicate that Black students comprised the largest portion of school-related referrals to law enforcement (42 percent), followed by Hispanics (29 percent) and Whites (25 percent).<sup>x</sup> Finally, African American students contend with the issue of "stereotype threat." Existing research suggests that students who are fearful of reinforcing a negative stereotype may actually underperform on exams. By nature, implicit bias is an unconscious phenomenon.

Therefore, resolving it requires that we bring the issue to the conscious level and address it directly. This is difficult work but a vital prerequisite to correcting other systemic issues.

Improving the cultural awareness and competence of teachers as a means of breaking down prior biases is a critical first step. The incorporation of culturally competent pedagogy as a standard practice for educators is essential. When teachers are aware and cognizant of cultural differences and their inherent value, they are more likely to teach and instruct through an asset-based lens. Thus, teachers should be held accountable for demonstrating this competence in the classroom and for successfully educating all students in their care. Appropriate benchmarks for progress include: increased student achievement among African American students; decreased gaps in student achievement between racial groups; increased participation in gifted programs; decreased participation in special education; and decreased gaps in school suspensions, expulsions, and police referrals.



However, we cannot rely on classroom teachers alone to address and eliminate implicit bias. Given that implicit bias is also a systemic issue, our response must be systemic as well. School districts must be challenged to shape and mold policy that is culturally competent and responsive. If educational policies fail to support system-wide professional development for all staff (e.g., board members, administrators, faculty and staff, etc.), we cannot effectively uproot implicit bias. Because implicit bias is internal and often deeply rooted, the act of becoming culturally competent and proficient is an inside-out process. But internal efforts by individuals to eliminate bias are less likely to be successful without establishing strong school policies and a climate of expectations, accountability, and standards. All actions that impact learning outcomes (e.g., attendance, graduation, testing, special education, discipline, etc.) should be shaped through a culturally proficient lens—not a deficit lens, especially in the case of African American students. When instituted in tandem, a strong, affirmative set of cultural competence policies for professional development, curriculum, instruction and assessment, and daily operational procedures have a stronger likelihood of eliminating implicit bias.

### **Encourage a community-wide approach to address poverty as an impediment to academic success**

Poverty can have a significant impact on educational outcomes. Concentrated poverty, in particular, has severe social, economic, health, and other repercussions that make it difficult for students to succeed. This is a particularly pressing issue for African Americans, as 37.5 percent of African American children under age 18 live in poverty<sup>xi</sup> and 45 percent live in concentrated poverty.<sup>xii</sup> Children and youth in poverty are more likely to be absent from school, experience hunger, and lack consistent medical care—all of which are barriers to doing well in school. Children and youth living in communities of concentrated poverty are more likely to be exposed to violence, causing trauma that can impact them in school and for a lifetime. Finally, there are subsets of young people who have particular needs and should be given additional care and attention, including those who are parenting, homeless, or involved in the child welfare or

juvenile justice systems. Community-wide approaches are critical because many parents and caregivers of African American children are grappling with the same challenges as students, leaving them unable to provide adequate support and parental engagement unless they too receive supportive services.

In 2011, 13.3 percent of Blacks were among the working poor, compared to 6.1 percent of Whites.<sup>xiii</sup>

Among all children, Hispanic and Black children are the most likely to live in working poor families.<sup>xiv</sup> Parents living in these high-risk communities are more likely to have poor mental health, more frequent feelings of stress or aggravation, and greater worries about their ability to provide for the needs of their children. These burdens make it difficult to parent effectively, creating a void in these youth's lives that must be filled by other caring adults.<sup>xv</sup> Integrating asset-based approaches that promote employment and economic opportunity for adults and youth will help stave off the negative impact of income and employment instability. Parental employment instability is linked to negative academic outcomes, such as grade retention and lower educational attainment.<sup>xvi</sup>

Schools are not capable of addressing the many issues that result from poverty alone. In high-poverty schools, the large number of students who need support demonstrates the importance of large-scale, community-wide approaches. To create a comprehensive plan for supporting students' development and achievement, schools must engage the many systems and programs that interact with children, including: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the workforce system, child welfare system, justice system, health care organizations, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, transportation agencies, and community centers. By embedding these services within the school (e.g., school-based health centers or the broader community schools model), the school becomes a hub for the entire community, and students and families receive the wrap-around supports they need without students missing precious school time. Schools, school districts, and community-based organizations are also critical partners in community-wide initiatives and programming that may not take place in schools. Their access to academic and non-academic resources is essential in developing and implementing partnerships and initiatives that supports the whole child and their families.

Past research demonstrates that when students are surrounded by wrap-around supports and services, they tend to do better academically, lead safer and healthier lives, have easier access to postsecondary education that leads to better employment, and are less likely to engage in destructive behavior (e.g., violence, substance abuse, etc.). When African American students feel prepared academically, their self-esteem increases, they have a more positive attitude toward school, their academic achievement increases, and ultimately problem behaviors are minimized. By rallying together to offer supportive services to vulnerable populations, communities help students overcome the effects of growing up in high poverty and provide a solid foundation for accessing postsecondary education and solid employment.

## Decrease disparities in school discipline

The issue of African American children, particularly boys, experiencing harsher school discipline is well-documented. The Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) has confirmed huge disparities between African American boys and all other children in suspension, expulsion, and school arrest rates. In addition, African American students have exceedingly high rates of referral to alternative education due to perceived disciplinary problems. These frequent suspensions, expulsions, and referrals work against the mission of schools, driving down academic performance and marginalizing the students they are supposed to educate.

African American students are more likely to be suspended for subjective infractions requiring interpretation (e.g., disrespect, excessive noise, threatening behavior), while white students are more likely to be suspended for clearly defined infractions (e.g., smoking, vandalism).<sup>xvii</sup> Several analyses of teacher behavior have led us to conclude that African American students are more likely to be subject to disciplinary action than other students who display the same behavior.<sup>xviii</sup> According to the American Psychological Association, the primary factors driving this phenomenon are lack of teacher preparation, racial stereotyping, and insufficient training in classroom management and culturally competent practices.<sup>xix</sup>

Effective strategies for improving school climates engage all school staff in the installation of a positive behavior management system and include social skill instruction in the classroom. For example, some schools have implemented restorative justice programs as alternatives to traditional, punitive discipline codes; these programs focus on the relationship between the perpetrator of misbehavior and members of the school community, including potential victims and their families. Another example is transformative classroom management that leverages students' motivation and engagement in order to increase adherence to classroom behavioral norms.

To address this issue, we urge the Commission to make several recommendations to advance African American student academic achievement, including: providing the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights with increased authority to sanction school systems that fail to address disparities; making school discipline a part of school accountability in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; making targeted investments in improving the cultural competence and classroom management skills of teachers; and providing school districts the financial resources and tools to revise their punitive discipline policies to incorporate more effective strategies.

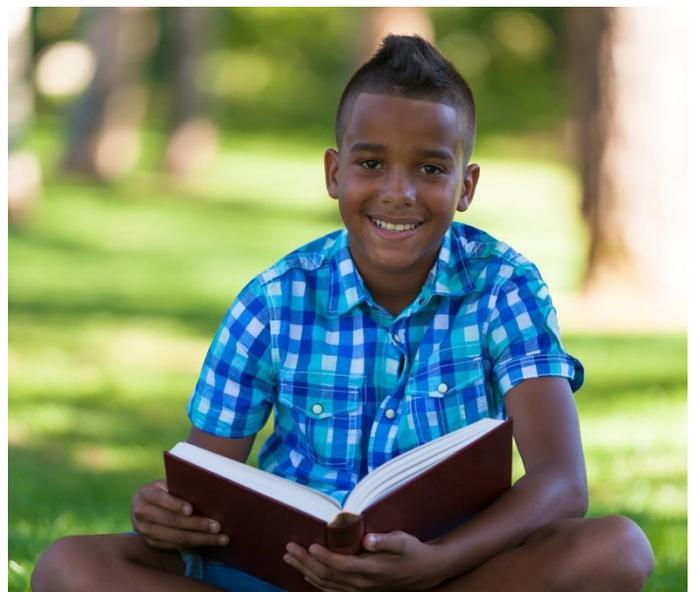
### **Elevate middle school as a critical time for intervention for African American students**

The middle school years represent a pivotal time in the lives of young people. Research shows that patterns of school attendance, behavior in school, and successful completion of courses are solid indicators of future success in high school. Analyses done in City of Philadelphia Public Schools showed that 80 percent of students who drop out show signs in either middle school or their first year of high school.<sup>xx</sup> Similarly, in Baltimore City Public Schools, research has shown that patterns of school disengagement appear several years before dropout actually occurs in high school and that many students enter high school already overage due to previous academic struggles and chronic absenteeism.<sup>xxi</sup> These findings are particularly significant because of Philadelphia's and Baltimore's large African American

populations and because the majority of the nation's dropouts come from large urban districts like these.<sup>xxii</sup>

Understanding how to identify students at high risk and intervene appropriately is key to keeping African American students in school and learning. Students with a history of academic struggles should have access to tutoring and other resources to strengthen their skills and address non-school factors that may interfere with learning. The key to providing that support is constructive and proactive use of school data. School districts can build early warning systems to identify students and utilize community partners that can provide strong academic supports in a culturally appropriate manner.<sup>xxiii</sup> But identifying students is only a first step; it won't be effective without ample resources and built-in plans for comprehensive intervention. The negative impact of growing up in poverty is clear, but these practices have proven to mitigate damage for middle school youth.

Other strategies shown to keep middle school students engaged include culturally responsive pedagogy and participation in out-of-school time activities. Culturally responsive pedagogy helps African American students make connections between their academics and racial and cultural identities. Participation in afterschool, summer learning, and extracurricular activities also contributes to African American students' continued engagement by helping them develop positive relationships with peers



and supportive adults. Studies show that students (especially high-risk students) involved in school extracurricular programs are less likely to drop out or be involved in delinquent activity.<sup>xxiv</sup> Moreover, those who participate in quality afterschool and summer learning programs see improvement in their academics, are more engaged in learning, and are more self-confident in what they can achieve.<sup>xxv</sup> Students develop relationships with adults in school through regular classroom instruction, participation in extracurricular activities, and mentoring opportunities that connect students with school personnel, community members, and volunteers. Students can develop relationships that contribute to their academic and social development and help them move into high school and higher education by bridging the gap between postsecondary aspirations and realities.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### **Redesign the high school experience to support college and career readiness**

The high school experience in America is outdated. It doesn't line up with employers' needs and too few students graduate with 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills. It is far more difficult today than it was 50 years ago to earn a family-sustaining wage with only a high school credential. And far too many young people, particularly African Americans, are not properly prepared for college and careers upon graduation. To address this, we must adopt new approaches to educating students that provide career competencies and college exposure at earlier ages, giving students knowledge and skills that match their interests and long-term career goals. These approaches include dual enrollment to attain college credits, use of technology for offsite learning, work-based learning opportunities, and access to rigorous courses such as Advanced Placement (AP).

While not offered in all high schools, dual and concurrent enrollment programs give students an opportunity to earn college credits while simultaneously taking high school courses. Studies have shown that students who access rigorous courses such as AP are more likely than their peers to graduate from college on time. This is because students who receive college credits in high school are more prepared for and able to afford college. Students who excel in a rigorous high school curriculum are less

likely to need remedial non-credit-bearing courses in college.

Implementation of these strategies is crucial in high-minority, high-poverty high schools, which are already starting out behind. The gaps in opportunity for college preparation and matriculation between white schools and minority high schools are large. The CRDC found that African American students are far less likely to attend high schools that offer higher-level mathematics and science courses. Further, when such courses are offered, African American students are less likely to be enrolled—even when school-level data shows they are qualified. African American students must have equal access to coursework that makes them eligible and competitive candidates for college enrollment, as well as academically prepared for successful matriculation. Work-based learning opportunities allow students to engage in real-time problem solving and application of classroom learning. It connects students with career exploration and cultivates postsecondary aspirations. Academic preparation and advancement should be coordinated with opportunities to gain work experience and to get involved in their communities. This requires the creation of strategies and partnerships across agencies and systems—workforce, postsecondary, business, and industry.

Research reveals that the teen brain is still developing through young adulthood and that the capacity of a person to learn will never be greater than during adolescence.<sup>xxvii</sup> Positive stimulation and engagement during this period are critical to helping students become productive members of society. The Administration has developed initiatives through the Departments of Education and Labor that assist local school districts and communities in implementing strategies that support college and career readiness for youth. Critical considerations include preparation, early work experience, and career and postsecondary exposure for African American students.

### **Invest in the recovery of African American students who have dropped out of school**

Each year, thousands of African American students drop out of high school. According to some estimates, nearly half of all African American male students who begin

high school fail to graduate four years later. If investments are made only at earlier points in the educational pipeline, these older students are lost and may remain so well into their young adulthood. Without a secondary school credential and postsecondary skills and credentials, their prospects for employment are dim. According to recent data from the Department of Labor, just 27 percent of Black high school dropouts ages 16-24 are employed.<sup>xxviii</sup> At the same time, business and industry leaders across many sectors are bemoaning the lack of career-ready young people to fill entry-level and middle-skilled positions. High school dropouts also place a severe economic and social strain on the nation. The immediate annual taxpayer burden for a 16-year-old who is out of school and out of work is \$13,900, while the immediate social burden is \$37,450. Over his or her lifetime, the economic and social burden totals \$1.56 trillion and \$4.75 trillion respectively. This includes lost earnings, tax payments, and public expenditures related to crime, health, and social supports. The social cohesion and overall health of a community are endangered when large numbers of youth remain idle. Addressing the issue of high school dropout and having leadership on dropout recovery is critical for the African American community and our nation as a whole.

Students who drop out of school and later seek to return to complete their education often encounter major roadblocks. In a survey of young people of color, many cited tremendous struggles in getting back into school<sup>xxix</sup>. More specifically, they reported: being told to enroll the following year; being placed on a waiting list to enroll; being referred to another school program with no supports to navigate the enrollment process; being required to have a parent re-enroll them; being unable to resolve credit issues; and/or being unable to find child care that suited the school schedule.

Students who stop coming to school are still the responsibility of the school district. Their absence is a signal that something has gone terribly wrong and that steps must be taken to identify the problem, remove roadblocks, and re-engage students in educational options that make sense for their age, academic level, and family and social circumstances. Public funding should follow students to the learning environment that will support completion of a secondary credential and prepare them

for postsecondary education and employment. Some students need additional time, instruction, and supports to get them to the appropriate reading and/or mathematics levels, while others may be at the right skill level already. Many students are parenting or working, so flexible scheduling and options are necessary to allow them to complete school. Wrap-around services, such as access to child care and transportation, also need to be considered. Therefore, high school reform policies must include a multiple-pathways approach to earning a diploma and gaining employment and postsecondary skills. Schools and districts can't do it alone, however; it's important that they partner with community-based organizations to provide academic and other supports to ensure success for these students. Dropout reengagement and recovery strategies require coordination, partnership, and the comingling of a broad array of public and private resources to provide these young people pathways to opportunity.

### **Foster policies that support postsecondary access and completion for African American students**

The African American community has long recognized college as a great equalizer that opens doors to opportunity for economic and employment advancement. With the creation of historically black colleges and universities after the Civil War, many African Americans could finally access pathways to careers and professions that were previously unavailable because of many predominately white institutions' prohibition on black admission.<sup>xxx</sup> But even today, far too many African Americans can't access postsecondary education because of ongoing legal discrimination and persistent elements of structural racism within public and institutional policy. African American students have lower rates of college enrollment than their white counterparts.<sup>xxxi</sup> In addition, while African American enrollment in postsecondary institutions has steadily increased, completion rates are disappointing. Currently, the 6-year college completion rate for African Americans students attending 4-year institutions is only 40 percent—much lower than their non-Black counterparts (50.6 percent for Hispanics and 62 percent for Whites).<sup>xxxii</sup> While it is important to improve postsecondary and college attainment for *all* African Americans, men are particularly in need. Black

females are far more likely than Black males to have earned a postsecondary degree—accounting for 68 percent of associate degrees, 66 percent of bachelor's degrees, 71 percent of master's degrees, and 65 percent of all doctoral degrees awarded to Black students.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

By 2018, over 60 percent of all American jobs are projected to require a two- or four-year college education.<sup>xxxiv</sup> At the same time, the fastest growing populations in the country are minority groups with the lowest levels of male educational attainment. Many scholars acknowledge a relationship between college completion and social equity and the risk we face as a nation of creating a permanent economic underclass if these challenges are not addressed.<sup>xxxv</sup> An obvious place to start is ensuring African American students are academically prepared at the secondary school level for postsecondary instruction. Too often, students of color and low-income students who are qualified for admission to more selective institutions fail to enroll, choosing instead to enroll in institutions where they are less likely to graduate on time or at all. Among policymakers and in the philanthropic sector, there is a major push for community colleges, despite consistently poor completion and transfer rates for minority students. It is imperative that these young people be afforded access to a variety of postsecondary education pathways that fit their needs and interests.



Having a postsecondary education—broadly defined as a credential beyond a high school diploma—continues to be one of the most important factors in getting a good job and advancing in the workforce. Employer demand for workers with at least some postsecondary education is expected to remain high, with nearly 65 percent of jobs requiring a postsecondary education by 2020. Yet, in 2010, just 62 percent of African American students graduated from high school within four years<sup>xxxvi</sup>. Many dropped out completely, with the worst dropout rates found in urban communities of concentrated poverty and in very low-income areas, such as the South and Southwest.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Findings from higher education literature suggest a wide range of factors that impede college access, participation, and achievement for young men of color. For example, African Americans often lack encouragement from teachers and counselors to enroll in college. And across African American, Native American, and Latino student groups, overpopulation in special education and low academic achievement negatively impact postsecondary participation. Young men of color, in particular, cite “feeling like an outsider” and having intense pressure to succeed from family members and peers as major challenges to postsecondary success.<sup>xxxviii</sup> There are several successful state and campus-based innovations that have shown progress toward postsecondary access and achievement for communities of color, including young men. Federal higher education policy should encourage and fund the expansion of these approaches to address racial and gender inequality in higher education.<sup>xxxix</sup> Other important issues include: addressing college affordability; creating culturally appropriate services that provide wraparound supports to aid students in completion; and creating awareness of and strong linkages to the labor market through work experience and career preparation. Policy development should take these factors into account and include a broader vision for African American males that addresses how financial aid, workforce, and education systems support their advancement in trades, professions, and careers.

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A full range of documents and resource materials can be accessed at: <http://www.clasp.org/youthofcolor>.

## Resources

### Climate and Connectedness

Eric A. Hanushek and Steven G. Rivkin, *School quality and the Black-White achievement gap*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Working paper No. 12651, 2006,  
<http://faculty.smu.edu/millimet/classes/eco7321/papers/hanushek%20rivkin%2002.pdf>.

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