



Education and Paths to Employment for Middle School Boys of Color

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Summary of Roundtable Discussion

Male students are color face significant disparities in educational achievement in public schools in the United States, beginning at the earliest grades. Research shows that middle school outcomes are a significant predictor of future success in school. Attendance, behavior, and coursework completion are the key indicators of later high school completion. For middle school boys of color, these three areas are influenced by many external issues over which they have little control – such as social conditions in the community, family instability, and cultural misconceptions of school staff. Addressing the issues of achievement for these boys also means taking a close look at the multiple factors that impact learning.

This roundtable looked at the issues facing boys in the middle school years, approximately ages 11-14 and discussed how current policy and practice at the federal level and local level is impacting academic outcomes and pathways to employment. Participants also discussed opportunities to change existing policy and practice, and to create public will for changes to benefit boys of color. Youth are touched by many systems, and the group acknowledged that there are multiple systems with a role to play in impacting outcomes. In addition, there are some populations within the broad group of boys of color who need particular attention and support. There were many individuals from higher education in this group, so there was also a strong discussion about the role that institutions of higher education should play in the pre-service preparation of teachers such that they are equipped to teach boys of color.

This document is a summary of the collective thinking generated by this discussion group, and serves to lay out a series of important policies and practices, as well as opportunities to frame the thinking about middle school boys of color to move new policy solutions.

Policies and Practices Impacting this Population

The education of young adolescents in the middle school years for males of color is critical, as it shaped their life trajectory. Effective education at this age can mean the difference between high school dropout and college attainment. To address strong educational and developmental outcomes, participants determined that policy reforms must occur at the federal level to prioritize this population, and at the local level to address issues such as high quality teaching, the presence of caring adults and parental involvement. In addition, higher education plays a role in preparation of the teaching workforce to effectively educate boys of color.

Federal Policies

- Accountability testing, as required by ESEA, does not facilitate remediation and is often misused. Accountability testing is actually an evaluation of the school system. However, consequences are

applied to students. Movement to common core is also said to have a negative impact on boys of color. There needs to be greater specific attention paid to outcomes for boys of color as accountability is revised as a part of education policy reform.

- There is no national unit focused on black male education and workforce development. There are comparable federal offices or departments focused on other youth of color such as bilingual instruction, American Indian and Alaska Native youth. Given the grave situation for black male students, an office that oversees and plans for implementation of reforms targeted to this population is necessary.
- The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights gathers data from school districts on issues such as special education, gifted education, and school disciplinary practice. The data clearly shows grave disproportionality for boys of color in each domain. The office, however, has not taken the next step to hold school districts and states accountable for eliminating these gaps between students of color and their white peers.
- The federal government has failed to adequately fund school and non-school projects that reduce community violence and gang activities. Boys of color are more likely to be victims of community violence, particularly in low-income communities. Intervention at the middle school level to protect boys of color and prevent participation in negative activities is critical to their academic success, as well as future employment and life outcomes.
- Housing instability and home ownership tends to affect school mobility rates. Due to income constraints, low-income and working-class families are more likely to move from house to house and, in turn, from school to school. Federal efforts are needed to improve the housing situation for families, and to improve opportunities for stable educational environments for students in those families.

State and District Level Policies

- The school counselor/student ratio is too high and inhibits the ability to effectively meet the academic, personal-social, and career needs of students. There are insufficient policies and structures in place to assure that school counselors have manageable case loads and the resources necessary to support their students.
- School data reveal the disparate impact of zero tolerance or harsh school discipline policy for boys of color, particularly African American boys. Suspension means loss of classroom time, which leads to diminished education outcomes and opportunities for leadership development. Punitive disciplinary measures often are the gateway into the criminal justice system, which stunt academic growth.
- Schools district teacher assignment policies often place highest qualified teachers in high performing schools, while placing less experienced teachers in schools with the students most in need. In addition, school districts often fail to retain great teachers by providing them the support needed to work in more challenging schools. Unfortunately, policies and union agreements often lead to the retention of teachers who are not providing quality instruction.

- Parental involvement is an ongoing challenge for schools and districts. The policies in place are generally minimal, and do not facilitate the empowerment of parents. Parents of boys of color need to be actively engaged in the educational process. This requires schools and districts to provide opportunities, and for parents to be educated about their rights.
- Summer learning loss is an area of struggle for all students, particularly students in low-income communities where resources are slim to provide high quality summer experiences. Districts and states need to consider policies for the implementation of programming, with particular focus in low-income communities of color.

Teacher Training

- There is insufficient cultural competence training in the education program for teachers, school counselors, and principals at the university level. To effectively educate boys of color, teachers need a deeper understanding of cultural norms and values in addition to their content expertise. School leaders need to be equipped to create a school culture that is accepting and nurturing of boys of color.
- Middle school is a time of many social/emotional changes for all students. In particular, boys of color experience gender-specific and cultural identification development during this time period. Teachers are often not equipped with sufficient knowledge about youth development. This often results in poor student-teacher relationships, and may also lead to school disciplinary actions for perceived behavioral issues.
- There is a lack of male educators of color in schools. For black males, there is a misconception they do not want to enter and the occupation. In reality, black males who attend college do enter the teaching profession in large number. There are, however, low numbers of black men attending college. In addition, black males in the education profession are often recruited to move up to school and district leadership positions. More teacher pipeline programs are needed to nurture and prepare males of color for the teaching corps.

Potential Solutions

Improving the academic outcomes boys of color requires attention to federal policies, local district policies, the pre-service educational environment of our teaching pool at institutions of higher education. In addition, school and district leadership must be willing to consider different schooling models that may prove beneficial for boys of color. The participants raised issues such as taking programs that work to scale in communities, and working intentionally on school culture and disciplinary issues. Participants also elevated the need to be intentional about certain special populations such as gifted students, highly mobile students, and those in special education.

Federal Policies

- Rethink the school year based on strategies such as competency-based learning instruction, extended learning time, and year-round school models.

- Federal policy on early warning indicator systems should include specific language to ensure that quality solutions are the goal, not just identification of “problem students.”
- Include stronger language about suspension and expulsion policies in federal policy, and equip the Department of Education Office of Civil Rights to formally address the race and gender disproportionalities that exist.
- Invest more federal resources in afterschool and summer learning supports for boys of color.
- Advance the concept of community and full-service schools in legislation and competitive grant programs. These school models bring services for students and their families into schools and make the school a recognized hub in the community.
- Create loan forgiveness programs, teacher pipeline programs, and other incentives to get more males of color in the field of education.

State and District Policies

- Develop and implement disciplinary policies in schools/districts that support intervention in an age-appropriate and culturally sensitive manner. Consider more restorative justice approaches to disciplinary policies in schools.
- Create more community schools and full service schools to meet multiple needs of students and families within the building.
- Examine the benefits of the pre-K-8 model for students. There is some support for the movement away from middle schools and toward primary (pre K-8) schools, which facilitates educational/social continuity. The data suggests that middle schools don’t work.
- Conduct a thorough review of effective practices and examples in single-gender schools. There is preliminary evidence of the success of single-gender school environments for boys of color.
- Create more partnerships with community-based organizations to increase high quality afterschool and summer learning opportunities to support achievement.
- Conduct an analysis of state-level traditional and alternative teaching certification policies. What does it mean to be certified in teaching methods/curriculum? Do these policies actually support the increase of qualified, effective teachers in classrooms serving boys of color?
- Develop policies to address school mobility issues among low-income students, enabling them to maintain stable school enrollment during transitions.

Teacher Training/Higher Education Policies and Practices

- Create formal partnerships between researchers at institutions of higher education and practitioners to support school/classroom/community-level interventions that benefit boys of color.
- Offer special topic courses and internship experiences for pre-service educators to obtain special training with teaching and working with boys of color.

School Practices

- Elevate the role of out-of-school time and afterschool programming to impact student achievement. For example, utilize mentors, additional instruction, and relevant learning activities during out-of-school time.
- Be more diligent about parental engagement at the school and district level. Understand the parent population at a particular school and strive to get them involved based on their interests, needs, and schedules. Acknowledge the reality that some parents may have themselves had tumultuous school experiences, and develop nurturing ways to seek parental participation.
- Ensure that schools implement and adhere to special education policies designed to ensure high quality education for students with special needs. This also is a legal tool for parents to utilize to obtain necessary services for their children.

Opportunities to Frame the Middle School Discussion

There is a need for strategic communication/messaging for this population. Middle schools boys of color tend to be an invisible population, both in the scholarly research and in school funding. The statements below are examples developed by this group of how to approach messaging for this population.

- The research available on boys of color regarding academic practice within middle school is quite limited. Lack of concrete evidence limits the ability to message effectively.
- Important to be mindful of the non-academic needs at middle school level. We can learn from the traction in the field of violence prevention. Consider an emphasis on the age category of “pre-adolescence” instead of a school frame. This supports the understanding of social needs and intervention in multiple policy arenas.
- Consider a framing of, “This is the last chance to intervene.” Middle school outcomes essentially set the trajectory for high school and young adult outcomes, unless significant intervention is made.
- It is important to reframe predictive models, such as “early warning indicator systems” to a positive, asset-based approach.

- Use an economics and community outcomes framework (i.e. the consequences of doing nothing versus the opportunities of doing something). “Fight Crime, Invest in Kids” is an example of this type of framing.
- Look at the framing and messaging of other campaigns for insights. The anti-bullying campaign is one example. Also consider lessons from the “occupy movement” and its focus on equity and equality.

Creating Political Will to Make Change

The group discussed ideas for engaging in a process to create public will for changes in education and pathways to employment for middle school boys of color. The group agreed there needs to be more visibility of the issues facing middle school aged boys of color in all developmental domains. They also acknowledged that there are key individuals who play a significant role in making change for these boys. Below are the ideas generated:

- Input from stakeholders/constituents at district level is needed to create sustainable change across a school district.
- Principal buy-in is critical to transform school environments and policies. Individual teachers cannot single-handedly change school climate or culture. School leaders must set the tone and expectation for all staff to follow.
- More research, articles, op-ed pieces are needed elevate the middle school issue and opportunities. Need to create a drumbeat to build on the efforts of school leaders and teachers who are paying attention and are focused on this area.
- The issue of male education is now one of broader interest, and has an increased following of individuals concerned with male education for everyone, including white males. Identify ways to build on this momentum.
- Dignity in Schools Campaign and Alliance for Education Justice were named as two examples of national groups with local influence who should be engaged in conversations about building public will.
- Building partnerships across communities of color is critical in creating momentum.

Other Observations for Consideration

- There is not enough research on this age-group. We need discovery-oriented projects. Is there any research specifically citing the impact on educational outcomes for middle school boys?
- A broader focus on non-academic needs (i.e. self-esteem, place within community etc.) is necessary.

- What about affluent suburban districts and their policies? What is the impact there on boys of color? We should also look deeper into racial disparities in rural/suburban areas, and disparities while controlling for socio-economic status.
- Is there an intersection of predictive models of “dropout” and the impact of single-gender schools?
- There is a role for higher education to play, and connections to be made with other systems, to coordinate solutions to more thoroughly educate potential teachers and prepare them for work with particular populations such as boys and young men of color.
- There is a need for translating data and examples of effective practice into strategic policy change. Also, we need conferences that allows for the translation and dissemination for broad audiences. More investment is needed in research to practice strategies.
- How can RWJF process facilitate innovative ways to disseminate policy briefs coming out of this work to all stakeholders?
- Need transparent policies inclusive of all the stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, district leaders, building level professionals, families, students, etc.).

Participants

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