

Tailored reforms could solve Black males' school problems

TWO POPULAR EDUCATION topics—high school reform and the achievement gap—converge in CRESPAR's *Cultural Issues Related to High School Reform: Deciphering the Case of Black Males* (Report 60) by Will Jordan and Robert Cooper. Arising from the discussion and merging of these two topics is the question, "What can be done within the context of school reform to improve the overall achievement and school success for Black male students?"

The authors concede that considering Black males "an endangered species" is not a new idea. In fact, Black males are persistently at risk not only of school failure, but also of "...infant mortality, poor public health, drug abuse, crime and legal problems, and unemployment," the report states. In schools, Black males are found time and time again on the low end of the achievement gap. "...Education statistics consistently reveal that Black males cluster at the bottom of the distribution of virtually every indicator of school failure, such as dropping out, absenteeism, suspension and expulsion, and low standardized test scores."

Although the authors cite instances where schools contribute to such failure, they also look to the schools, more than other institutions in society, to prevent, and help reverse, it. Schools are the one compulsory institution all Black males encounter, and furthermore, schools "should act as a vehicle of social mobility for poor and minority students, while simultaneously helping middle class students reproduce their social status. Good schools encourage at-risk students to surpass the level of education of their parents..." the authors state.

This is where school reform enters the picture. Comprehensive high school reforms introduce proven strategies and methods for improving the school climate and organization, instituting challenging curricula, and preparing and monitoring teachers. Such improvements should contribute to greater achievement by all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or social class.

They should also close the achievement gap between Black and White, as well as affluent and poor, students.

Reforms often do not, however, address cultural relevancy. Indeed, school reformers often believe that effective education should be "culturally neutral" and color-blind. There is, however, "new knowledge about the cultural relevancy and the education of Black adolescents." Much of this focuses on the race and cultural background of teachers, according to the report.

Within this debate over cultural relevancy or cultural neutrality lie two issues that the authors suggest could be helpful to the success of Black males in school. Neither is considered part of comprehensive high school reform. In fact, "the discourse on high school reform is occurring apart from new knowledge about cultural relevancy and the education of Black adolescents," they report.

These issues are the lack of attention to the cultural uniqueness of Black males and the relative shortage of Black male teachers," the report states. Increasing the number of Black male teachers in high schools would seem, on its face, to be one move in the right direction—giving students more people to identify with and to see as role models. The authors stress, though, it is just that and not *the* cure-all for the problems besetting Black males in America's schools.

The effect of more Black male teachers and a more culturally relevant curriculum on the achievement of Black male students is still to be determined. The authors conclude, in fact, with recommendations for further research, including involving Black male teachers in reform initiatives and merging the two bodies of research literature, which have not intersected frequently. G

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