Educating Black and Latino Males
Striving for Educational Excellence and Equity

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"The dilemma faced by boys of color is not a Black problem, or a Latino problem, or some other community's problem. It is not even an American problem; it is a global problem. It will take political and personal will and the best efforts of all of us to overcome the challenges posed by this truly human dilemma."

—Dr. Pedro Noguera, 2012

"The challenge we face in educating our African-American and Latino males has a prescriptive solution. We must create 'conditions' in our schools that identify and support their dreams and aspirations."

—Stephen G. Peters, CEO, The Peters Group, 2012
"Capture, Inspire, Teach"

Introduction

More than 250 school district, organizational, and business leaders gathered to discuss education practices for Black and Latino boys and young men.

Scholars, educators, and thought leaders from across the country gathered at the offices of American Reading Company in the spring of 2012 for a daylong conference and action-planning session centered on how to best educate Black and Latino boys and young men. The sharing of research findings, best educational practices, and personal stories shaped a day that "captured, inspired, and instructed" (Stephen Peters) more than 250 school district, organizational, and business leaders and established the foundation for this white paper. The paper seeks to harness the energy of the day by articulating a set of Touchstones and Implications for Practice as a contribution to the ongoing dialogue about *how to overcome the challenges posed by this everyday matter of life and death for many of our children and young men.*

The Conference

Keynoted by Dr. Pedro Noguera, the conference was modeled on three interlocking areas:

Structure, Culture, and Agency

The morning session was keynoted by Dr. Pedro Noguera, the Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education at New York University. Dr. Noguera's presentation, *What About the Boys? Providing Academic and Social Support to African-American and Latino Males*, provided a powerful framework for the conference and the panel discussion that followed. The model focuses on three interlocking areas: structure, culture, and agency. Dr. Noguera identified the barriers to success faced by Black and Latino boys and young men in each of these areas, and identified research-based practices that have been shown to increase their school engagement and accelerate their academic achievement.

A diverse group of panelists shared experiences and research to connect and to continue the discussion of educational best practices.

The panel discussion that followed provided an opportunity for a diverse group of panelists to share experiences and research connected to Dr. Noguera's keynote address and its themes:

- Mr. Emilio Garcia, a recent graduate of the School District of Philadelphia and former president of its City-Wide Student Government, spoke movingly about the teachers in his life, both Black and White, who opened the door to scholarship for him. He also highlighted the transformative role of learning to read books for his own purposes in helping him move into the top ranks of academic achievement.

- Mr. Johnny Walker and Mr. Rahim Islam from Universal Companies Charter Schools spoke about the importance of a clear operating system for student achievement as essential to delivering the promise inherent in their vision and mission.

- Dr. Irvin Scott, Deputy Director of Education at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, shared powerful stories—in both poetry and prose—of teachers who challenged him to apply academic models of rhetoric and art to his own life.

- In the remarks of Mr. Ron Walker, Executive Director of the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color, participants were reminded of the importance of rituals, ceremonies, and rites of passage that connect boys to the school experience and bolster their emotional and social development.

- Finally, Mr. Stephen Peters, author of *Do You Know Enough About Me to Teach Me?,* encouraged us to "do something" and reminded us that rather than attempting to quash student energy, we should use the energy students bring to school to power their achievement.

Stephen Peters encouraged attendees to "do something" to energize students and optimize their environments.

The afternoon action-planning session, led by Dr. Noguera, brought participants together in small groups facilitated by school district leaders. It is our purpose in this paper to lay out some of the important principles, findings, and practices that emerged from these discussions and to contribute to the dialogue about how to ensure educational excellence and equity for boys and young men of color.

The Challenge

Whether presented by the United States Department of Education, educational researchers, or school districts and schools across the country, the facts about the school engagement and academic achievement of boys and young men of color are disturbing. As summarized by Noguera in the February 2012 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan:*

"On all of the indicators of academic achievement, educational attainment, and school success, African-American and Latino males are noticeably distinguished from other segments of the American population by their consistent clustering at the bottom (Schott, 2010). With few exceptions, these dismal patterns exist in urban, suburban, and rural school districts throughout the United States. Nationally, African-American and Latino males are more likely than any other group to be suspended and expelled from school (Fergus & Noguera, 2010). In most American cities, dropout rates for African-American and Latino males are well above 50%, and they're less likely to enroll {in} or graduate from college than any other group (Schott, 2010).

African-American and Latino males are more likely to be classified as mentally retarded or to be identified as suffering from a learning disability and placed in special education (Losen & Orfield, 2002). They're more likely to be absent from gifted and talented programs, Advanced Placement and honors courses, and international baccalaureate programs (Noguera, 2008). Even class privilege and the material benefits that accompany it fail to inoculate Black males from low academic performance. When compared to their White peers, middle-class African-American and Latino males lag significantly in grade-point average and on standardized tests."

These patterns have become so common and widespread that a recitation of the numbers no longer generates alarm or even surprise. The real danger is that too many educators and too many members of the public at large have begun to accept this dismal state of affairs as the norm. The most important underlying challenge is to undermine that acceptance and create a new norm in which the facts are no longer acceptable, or worse yet, expected as a matter of course.

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—Schott (2010)

A Way Forward: 5 Touchstones

The following Touchstones, as well as the Implications for Practice they suggest, have emerged as we continue to think through how best to accelerate the school engagement and academic achievement of males of color—and in the process, undermine the too-often accepted norm of their disengagement and underachievement. This "way forward" is informed in large part by Noguera's *Six Essentials for Educating Black and Latino Students* and Stephen Peters' *Do You Know Enough About Me to Teach Me?* It is also informed by the emerging research on successful practice, as well as broad educational principles expressed over the centuries by engaged thinkers from Plato to Piaget.

Each of these Touchstones has implications for the three areas on which Noguera focuses in his framework: structure, culture, and agency. This three-pronged focus allows us to move beyond the false dichotomies in which the discussion is often simplistically framed: the hopelessness arising from variations on the "demographics are destiny" argument or variations on the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" position. The fact is that a way forward in addressing the dilemma faced by boys and young men of color in schools must address the interconnected ways in which institutional arrangements (structure) and the attitudes and beliefs (culture) do or do not support the engagement and success (agency) of all students.

"When students' voices are developed and heard they will be the best equipped to teach us about themselves."

—Ada and Campoy (2012)

We are mindful that any discussion of closing the achievement gap or arresting it before it begins is situated within a larger social, political, and economic problematic of unearned privilege that constrains the impact of the "way forward" we propose. A complete effort to improve public schools, in which the majority of Black and Latino males are educated, would have to address educational issues in concert with other issues such as poverty, joblessness, inadequate health care, and the lack of public services. However, we are also aware of the extent to which this larger problematic is often used by both educators and the public as an excuse for paralysis and inaction or for the casting of blame—on parents, on neighborhoods, on popular culture and, mostly, on students.

Finally, we are mindful of the need for more and better research as we continue to identify schools and districts whose principles, policies, and practices are having a positive impact on our boys and young men of color. Alma Flor Ada and F. Isabel Campoy note the importance of participatory action research, emphasizing that valuable informants are present in the classroom: "When students' voices are developed and heard they will be the best equipped to teach us about themselves."

What follows is meant to be neither comprehensive nor definitive. If anything is clear, it is that there is no one right way to educate any child. The 5 Touchstones represent our best, present, ever-evolving thinking; it is our hope they will contribute to the ongoing dialogue.

Touchstone #1: *Unconscious biases, fears, and assumptions are obstacles to school success.*

The Problem: Biases, fears, and deeply held assumptions about Black and Latino males work against their school success. As Noguera would have it, "The biggest obstacle to students' success is the adults who believe they cannot succeed and the behaviors that follow from that belief" (Boykin and Noguera, 2010). There is also a growing body of evidence that as boys of color grow older, these biases, fears, and assumptions grow more pronounced and are internalized in the form of "the stereotype threat," leading them to underperform in a manner consistent with the stereotype (Steele and Aronson, 1995).

For boys and young men of color, often disconnected from the world of schooling, Herbert Kohl's "thoughts on the role of assent in learning" are particularly prescient in this regard. He reminds us that "not-learning" or refusal to learn is often the direct result of a student's intelligence, dignity, or integrity being compromised by a teacher, an institution, or a larger social mindset (Kohl, 1992).

Indeed, contemporary studies point time and again to the perception on the part of boys of color that the most important variable in their decision to apply themselves to a particular subject matter or engage in a particular activity is whether or not the teacher, coach, or activity leader seems to care about them as people (Boykin and Noguera, 2010). An overwhelming number of school-successful men of color trace the genesis of their success to one teacher with whom they developed a strong bond. Through that teacher's unstinting support, they were connected to their learning and to the school community, and when they fell short academically or behaviorally, that teacher reconnected them.

Key Implications for Practice:

- Expect the discomfort and resistance (from all stakeholders) that always precedes the disruption of deeply held beliefs. As Dr. Cathy Taschner, Deputy Superintendent of the Susquehanna, PA, Public Schools, notes, "Moving a system out of equilibrium

> **"The biggest obstacle to students' success is the adults who believe they cannot succeed and the behaviors that follow from that belief."**
>
> *— Boykin and Noguera (2010)*

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into the pursuit of excellence is no small task. People resist initially, addressing the naysayers takes energy." Give principals and other school leaders the tools to manage the change process; hold them accountable for using those tools.

- Recruit and retain more Black and Latino males as administrators, teachers, and mentors.

- Ensure that all administrators, teachers, and mentors are culturally competent; that they actually believe and are able to demonstrate explicit and sincere affirmations of the academic abilities of Black and Latino males; and that they have established bias- and stereotype threat-free classrooms and school communities through systematic, embedded staff development for district administrators, principals, teachers, and support staff. Dr. Deborah Jewell-Sherman, Senior Lecturer at Harvard University's School of Education and the former superintendent of the Richmond, VA, Public Schools reminds us, however, that until such time as everyone changes his or her beliefs (which the principal or other educators cannot control), teachers and other adults who are most instrumental in the education of our youth must act as if they believed.

Create a community of practice in which all participants are challenged to respect and empathize with students and families and the community.

- Create a community of practice in which school leaders, teachers, and support personnel are challenged to respect and empathize with students and families and the communities in which they live.

- Routinely work with teachers on the use of insights from theories of development (cognitive, socio-cultural, emotional, moral, racial and ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, constructions of masculinity) to better understand student behaviors and as evidence in instruction and scaffolding. Many student behaviors, when viewed in isolation from their developmental context, can reinforce unconscious bias and stereotypes.

- Support the engagement of teachers and students in informal, spontaneous interactions as well as in formal classroom activities, such as the "authors in the classroom" process, through which both teachers and students share important information about themselves. Positive relations between teachers and students bolster student empowerment and engagement; this is especially true for students of color (Ada and Campoy, 2004).

- Establish and support school organizing systems and activities that build authentic, caring relationships between teachers and students beyond the formal classroom., e.g., chess clubs, adult and peer mentoring systems, internships in the community, showcases for student and student and teacher talent and areas of expertise, etc.

- Establish classroom routines, K-12, requiring teachers to spend some time each day using systematic formative assessment frameworks to work one-on-one with their students. This is the quickest way for teachers to establish academic friendships, locate areas of strength and need, and surrender assumptions and stereotypes. As Stephen Peters says, "You can't teach a child you don't know."

"You can't teach a child you don't know."

—Peters (2010)

- Require teachers to provide evidence that the males of color (and all other students) in their classroom are making adequate or accelerated progress. Insist that administrators check on this progress using meaningful monitoring systems. As teachers see that some teachers are more successful with students than they are, they will confront the reasons for this variation and re-think their deeply entrenched assumptions and the practices on which they are based.

- Set up schedules and learning teams that require teachers to open their classrooms to their peers.

Touchstone #2: *Entrenched institutional practices limit opportunities for male students of color.*

The Problem: Entrenched institutional practices limit opportunities for many Black and Latino boys and young men. Male students of color are traditionally underrepresented in gifted and honors classes and overrepresented in remedial classes and special education. Boys of color are suspended at higher rates, and far too often the approach to discipline they encounter is based on a model of punishment grounded in a sometimes openly articulated belief that many boys of color can be identified from the earliest of ages as "bound for jail." Ann Arnett Ferguson chillingly describes "a disturbing pattern of African-American male footsteps out of classrooms, down hallways and into disciplinary spaces throughout the school day" (Ferguson, 2001). She goes on to argue that this pattern has devastating consequences for how these "bad boys" come to construct their racial identities and the range of their life prospects.

Male students of color are traditionally underrepresented in gifted and honors classes and overrepresented in remedial classes and special education.

Key Implications for Practice:

- De-track schools, especially in the primary grades. Ability tracking often reflects teacher and institutional evaluations based on factors other than intellectual ability.

- Mainstream students with disabilities. Special education is notoriously unsuccessful across all racial and ethnic groups. Male students of color are traditionally overrepresented in special education classes. Often the only disability these students possess is ABT— "Ain't Been Taught."

We must tackle head-on the negative effects of unconscious bias in how males of color are taught and disciplined through a systematic review of all operating systems.

- "One size fits all" programs must be replaced with multi-source, multi-level curricula and teachers who know how to use and support the diversity in their classrooms to improve teaching and learning for everyone.

- Tackle head-on the negative effects of unconscious bias in how males of color are taught and disciplined through a systematic review of all operating systems, especially those that sort, track, punish, or reward students.

- Center behavior management approaches around connecting males of color to the learning environment. Center discipline policies around restoring that connectedness when it is broken. Do not further disrupt the connection through policies of humiliation, recrimination, and exclusion.

- Create comprehensive systems in which multiple sources of data are used and shared, making it possible for schools to intervene early and effectively when challenges arise.

- Provide personalized learning environments with mentors, counseling, and other supports from the neighborhoods and communities in which students live.

Touchstone #3: *School is often an inhospitable environment for many male students, including males of color.*

The Problem: Boys of all races and ethnic groups increasingly find school an inhospitable environment and school success elusive. Don Clossun (2010) summarizes this trend:

"Boys are twice as likely to be labeled as 'learning disabled' and in many schools are ten times more likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities such as ADD."

—Clossun (2010)

> *"Recent statistics reveal that from elementary school and beyond, girls get better grades than boys and generally fare better in school. Although girls have all but eliminated the math and science gap with boys, boys' scores in reading and writing have been on the decline for years. At the end of eighth grade, boys are held back 50 percent more often, and girls are twice as likely to say that they want to pursue a professional career. Boys are twice as likely to be labeled as 'learning disabled' and in many schools are ten times more likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities such as ADD. Boys now make up two-thirds of our special education classes and account for 71% of all suspensions. There is also evidence that boys suffer from low self-esteem and lack of confidence as learners."*

Black and Latino boys often bring to their schooling experience an energy that does not fit with a traditional "cemetery-style" approach to education in which teachers put students in rows and demand that they remain silent, and where compliance, rather than evidence of learning, constitutes the measure of school success. The implicit message for many boys is "Check your testosterone at the door."

"As America increasingly becomes a digital nation, more low-income families must benefit from the educational resources and assistance the Internet provides."

—Alberto Carvalho,

Superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools and President of the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS)

Key Implications for Practice:

- District leaders must own the challenge and problem solve with schools to improve the achievement of Black and Latino males. Mr. Alberto Carvalho, Superintendent of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, reminds us that district leaders must be prepared to provide strategic resources to that end. Sustained district leadership for the expansion of magnet schools, initiatives to ensure technological equity regardless of zip code, and innovative ways of engaging students beyond the traditional trappings of Carnegie Units, walls and textbooks has led to school environments of high expectations and a constant raising of the bar. The results are impressive, including sustained improvement in student performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in Reading, Mathematics and Writing, as well as record numbers of Latino and Black students taking AP exams and scoring three or higher.

- Increase the capacity of teachers to deliver differentiated pedagogical practices that meet the needs of all students and offer opportunities for engagement for children of both genders from various backgrounds, beginning with high-quality early childhood programs and extending through 12th grade. These practices include active learning strategies that channel and make positive use of the diverse levels of physical and emotional energy that children bring with them to school. They also include cooperative learning strategies that capitalize on the strengths of all learners.

- Increase the capacity of teachers to pay careful attention to student engagement throughout the school day, to create structures that reflect changing levels of energy and engagement throughout the day, and to take the time to engage students in critical conversations and thought exercises.

- Ensure that every student has at least one adult in his life who takes an active interest in that student's academic success. Ideally, that is a parent or other family member. For any student for whom that is not the case, find that student a Surrogate Coach immediately (Hupfeld, 2007).

- Provide students with opportunities to became increasingly engaged in and responsible for their own learning through higher levels of choice about what they read; to discuss what they read with their peers, to write about what they read, and to discuss what they have written with their peers; and to come to understand the assessment of their work and engage in conversation about what they need in order to make progress (and in the process, to become more responsible for and connected to their academic performance).

- Engage boys and young men of color themselves in the discourse about "what works"—not only those who have been school-successful, but, as Dr. Jewell-Sherman reminds us, those who have not. So many of our brightest young leaders have detoured into the juvenile justice system; the most fortunate among them make it back. Their examples and testimonies are critical elements to this discourse and in ongoing professional development for educators.

"They won't do it unless they assent to doing it."

—Kohl (1992)

Touchstone #4: *Multigenerational, hyper-segregated poverty brings additional challenges for many Black and Latino males.*

The Problem: Owing to the historical intersection of class and race in the United States, a large number of Black and Latino boys live in racially, economically, and culturally segregated neighborhoods. Immigration and/or first-language issues add another layer of challenge for many Latino boys. As a result, many of our boys and young men of color do not grow up in environments in which the cultural and behavioral norms of home, neighborhood, and school are seamlessly integrated and reinforcing. Indeed, many of them experience cognitive and emotional dissonance every day as they travel from the world of home to the world of the streets to the world of school. As long as schools rely on deficit-driven models in which students' homes and neighborhoods are seen as mere obstacles, not as potential assets, boys of color will more often than not see school as a choice between "the teacher and mama" (Delpit, 2006). School success will often mean that students learn how to "code switch" as they move across their many environments. They won't do it unless they assent to doing it (Kohl, 1992); they can't do it unless they are taught how to do it (Delpit, 2006). Many teachers are currently unprepared and/or unwilling to accept responsibility for this piece of schooling.

The majority of academically successful students, most of them from homes in which at least one parent is a college graduate and in which successful academic routines are as pervasive as the air they breathe, read on their own, both for their own reasons and because their parents do. Before they ever start Kindergarten, they have been read to for an average of 2000 hours. When they are 17 years old and arrive for the SAT test, they bring the fluency, stamina, and everyday habit of reading complex, grade-level text in a wide variety of genres. They have academic vocabularies of at least 15,000 words not in the everyday speech of most college-educated adults.

"If you're born poor, you'd better be reading."

—Schmoker (2011)

This independent reading habit accounts for a large part of the achievement gap faced by males of color, especially those living in poverty, who for a variety of historical and cultural reasons do not develop this life habit. Instead, many arrive at school lacking academic role models, are unfamiliar with academic home routines, experience a vocabulary gap that grows exponentially with each successive year of schooling, and have led a comparatively print-free life. Schools must address this. As Mike Schmoker says, "If you're born poor, you'd better be reading" (2011).

Key Implications for Practice:

•   Establish a reading culture in which every student is expected to be an avid reader, reading for their own purposes, from books they can read and want to read, for at least an hour every day.

•   Determine the highest reading level at which each student is currently able to read and understand text. Share the results with the student.

•   Require every student to document 30 minutes of reading practice every day in school from books they can read and choose to read.

•   Require every student to document 30 minutes of reading practice at home, and if this is not completed, ensure this home reading time is completed in school.

•   Track the amount of documented time spent reading (effort) and the rate of reading progress (achievement) of every student, classroom, and school.

•   Require teachers and principals to put in place whatever organizational supports are required to ensure that 100% of their students document this amount of reading practice. This includes those who hate to read, who can't read, who miss many days of school, whose first language isn't English, who are often on suspension, who won't cooperate, whose parents won't help them. This includes everyone. This requires that every single student decide to "buy in" to school.

•   Understand that in order to meet this challenge, classrooms and schools must reorganize many of their systems and rethink many of their assumptions. As they learn to do this, they will learn to do much of what needs to be done in order to succeed with all students, including and especially Black and Latino boys and young men.

Touchstone #5: *The curriculum and the instructional practices that deliver it often fail to engage males of color.*

The Problem:

The school and its curriculum must serve as a mirror in which the personal, cultural, and historical experiences and assets of boys and young men of color are reflected and built upon. In spite of the multicultural curricula developed over the past two decades, school remains too often a place in which White males find many mirrors to look in and few windows which frame others' lives.

Males of color, on the other hand, find almost no mirrors of themselves in the "house of curriculum" (Stiles, 1996). This remains true even in schools that provide such mirrors as important components of the formal curriculum, but fail to deliver those components in ways that effectively engage these students and connect their lives to what they are expected to read, write, think, and talk about.

Equally important, schools must create windows—opportunities for students, particularly males of color, to expand their experiences with the broader human family and to widen their potential horizons. As Noguera (2012) asserts, "It's hard to aspire to something you have never seen." This imperative requires educators to think broadly about the kinds of actual and vicarious learning experiences and opportunities we need to include in our formal and hidden curricula.

Key Implications for Practice:

- Ensure the curricula and materials in every subject area reflect the multicultural nature of our shared history, science, and arts.

- Deliver instructional practices that cultivate agency, not mere compliance. Students (and teachers) must learn to take responsibility for their own learning, their own success, their own lives.

- Beginning in pre-Kindergarten, students must learn to be creative and critical thinkers, using a problem-solving approach to learning, rather than mindlessly applying rules and algorithms that don't make sense to them.

- Embedded in every lesson must be the notion that students are entitled to expect their work to make sense and to matter to them personally. Principals should evaluate classrooms from the earliest years by asking students the simple questions "What are you doing? Why are you doing it?"

- The curriculum should formally teach the skills necessary for all students, particularly males of color, to navigate the "worlds" in which they live and travel. Teachers should be forthright in acknowledging the complexities and challenges inherent in doing so successfully.

"It's hard to aspire to something you have never seen."

—*Noguera (2012)*

The school and its curriculum must serve as a mirror in which young men of color are reflected and built upon.

Smart is not something you are.

Smart is something you become.

- Ensure that teachers surrender their reliance on the "standard curriculum" as protection from taking responsibility for the success of individual students. Dr. Nikolai Vitti, Chief Academic Officer, Office of Academics and Transformation for the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, reminds us of the importance of creating multiple, rigorous pathways for student success. College exposure and preparation, military programs, career technical education with extended internships, and other alternative pathways can help serve the needs of a wide range of students—including Black and Latino boys—and position them in a pipeline for success.

- Supplement in-classroom learning with digital curriculums and at-home assignments.

- Ground curriculum and instructional practice in the principle "Smart is not something you are. Smart is something you become."

Conclusion

"We have to do a better job of educating Black and Latino males. Public education is rightly concerned with the best way to do that, and we must put the spotlight on this crucial issue."

—Dr. Heath E. Morrison,

Superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

2012 American Association of School Administrators' National Superintendent of the Year

The promise of educational excellence and equity is undermined by the ongoing disengagement and underachievement of Black and Latino males. This crisis cannot be met by re-deploying under different names the assumptions and strategies that have contributed to the achievement gap. Nor can it be met by paralysis or the casting of blame. It can only be met by ongoing identification of the attitudes, policies, and practices that are shown to nurture the school success of African-American and Latino males; honest reflection about how to replicate and extend the reach of what we know works; and the marshaling of resources necessary to ensure that replication and extension. It is our hope that the Touchstones and Implications for Practice presented here constitute a contribution to this important work.

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