

POLICY NOTES

News from the ETS Policy Information Center

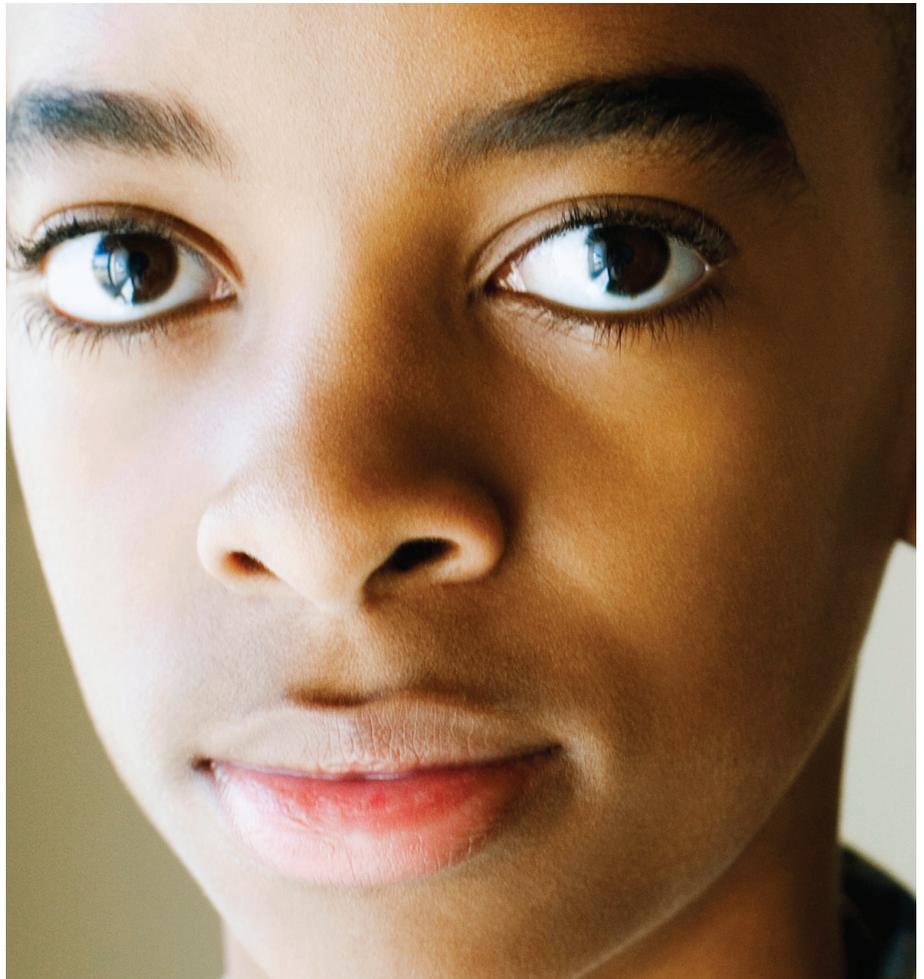
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In this Issue

African-American boys are at risk. Their test scores lag behind those of their White peers, and they are far more likely to grow up in poverty, attend struggling schools and drop out before graduation. The physical, emotional and social transitions of the middle school years, ages 9 to 13, pose especially great risks for these already-vulnerable children. As they grow toward adulthood, societal stereotypes of Black men as uneducated and criminal undermine Black boys' self-esteem and can shape teachers' attitudes towards them. Schools often fail them, administering discipline with disproportionate harshness and teaching material that is unengaging, insufficiently rigorous and disconnected from their experience. And with Black men making up less than 2 percent of the nation's public school teachers, Black boys lack role models at the front of the classroom. To give the nation's 1.5 million middle school Black boys a better chance, adults need to provide them with psychological armor against the negative stereotypes they will encounter; educators need to experiment with reforms that could make a difference, such as

(continued on page 12)



Middle School Matters: Improving the Life Course of Black Boys

The numbers tell an unmistakable story: African-American boys are in trouble. Black boys are three times as likely as White ones to grow up in poverty, and 10 times as likely to attend a high-poverty secondary school. Their test scores lag, they are disproportionately likely to repeat a grade, and they are punished more harshly than other children for school infractions. If current trends hold, one-third of the Black boys born in 2001 will spend time in prison. "I can think of no other group in our country that is at such peril as African-American males, not only in terms of education but in

so many other aspects of our society: health, civic participation, employment, and the victimization of violence,” ETS Senior Vice President **Michael Nettles** said during a recent ETS symposium on African-American boys of middle school age.

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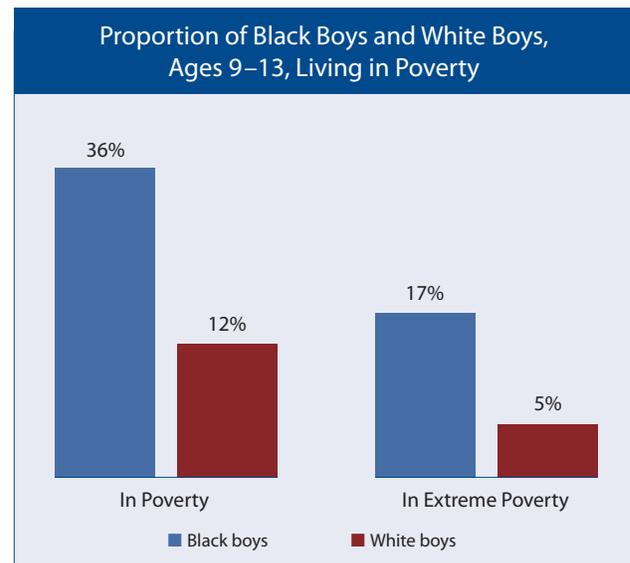
– Michael Nettles, ETS Senior Vice President

The symposium, “Middle School Matters: Improving the Life Course of Black Boys,” was the second in a series of four symposia, co-sponsored by ETS and the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF), that are examining the education and status of African-American males, from birth to age 24. The symposium took place July 23–24 at the Duke Energy Convention Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, during CDF’s national conference, “Pursuing Justice for Children and the Poor with Urgency and Persistence.” Fourteen academics, advocates and school officials spoke to audiences ranging in size from 80 to 200. The joint ETS-CDF series on Black males began in June 2011, with a symposium in Washington, D.C., examining early childhood and elementary school; later sessions will look at the high school and college years. The four symposia on Black males form part of ETS’s series of “Addressing Achievement Gaps” conferences, currently in its ninth year.

The middle school years — ages 9 to 13 — with their physical changes, heightened academic expectations and first steps toward independence, can be difficult for any child, said speakers at the ETS-CDF symposium. But for African-American boys, many of whom already face

myriad challenges that other children do not, those years can be especially difficult, the moment “when our kids begin to fall off the cliff,” said symposium speaker **Geoffrey Canada**, President of the Harlem Children’s Zone and Chairman of CDF’s board. Symposium speakers discussed how, as Black boys mature toward adulthood, they run up against pervasive stereotypes of Black men as uneducable and criminal, cultural messages that burden them psychologically and influence the way that schools educate and discipline them. In addition, children in middle school face higher demands on their literacy skills, and those who are already struggling may fall further behind and begin to loosen their hold on schooling. Too often, schools fail to engage Black boys, offering a curriculum that is dull, insufficiently rigorous or irrelevant to their lives, symposium speakers said. And with Black men making up fewer than 2 percent of the nation’s public school teachers, Black boys seldom see themselves reflected in the authority figures at the front of their classrooms.

Figure 1



Note: Extreme poverty is defined as below 50 percent of the poverty line — about \$31 a day for a family of four.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2011.

For the 1.5 million African-American boys between 9 and 13, the academic, social and emotional problems that pick up momentum during the middle school years too often culminate in adult lives scarred by educational failure, unemployment and incarceration. Still, while social problems are often described as too big to solve, the problems of middle school Black boys are not. “We know that young Black boys can do anything that anybody can do,” CDF President **Marian Wright Edelman** told the symposium audience. “They’ve been the whipping boys of our history, but we’re here to reclaim our children.”

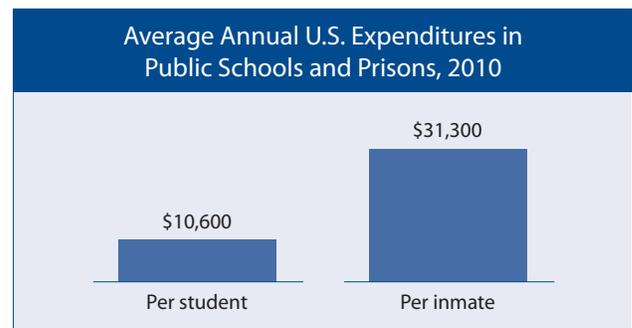
“We know that young Black boys can do anything that anybody can do. They’ve been the whipping boys of our history, but we’re here to reclaim our children.”

*– Marian Wright Edelman,
President, Children’s Defense Fund*

Symposium speakers offered an array of suggestions for keeping these boys on track. Adults must give Black boys the psychological tools to defend themselves against the barrage of negative stereotypes they will encounter, and schools need to experiment with structural and curricular changes that might help — everything from single-sex schools to curricula that engage with students’ life experiences. Teacher education programs, too, need to do better at turning out teachers prepared to educate students from diverse backgrounds, speakers said. And, given the shortage of research on middle school Black boys, academics have an array of important questions to answer about how Black boys succeed, and why so many do not.

Symposium speakers emphasized the urgency of needed remedies, for, in an increasingly globalized

Figure 2



Source: Mark Dixon, *Public Education Finances: 2010*, U.S. Census Bureau, June 2012.

Source: Christian Henrichson and Ruth Delaney, *The Price of Prisons: What Incarceration Costs Taxpayers*, Vera Institute of Justice, January 2012.

world, the United States can ill afford the waste of human potential manifested in the sobering statistics about the lives of Black men. “There’s a powerful economic argument that prisons are not more effective than spending the money to invest in these young people on the front end,” said symposium speaker **James Roland**, Director of Community Outreach and Engaged Scholarship for Emory University’s debate team, the Barkley Forum. The country needs to identify and encourage talented African Americans overlooked by traditional assessment methods, said speaker **Ronald Mason Jr.**, President of the five-campus Southern University System in Louisiana. “That’s not only in the interests of Black boys and men,” he said, “but it’s also a critical economic issue that America has to solve if it’s going to be globally competitive over time.”

“There’s a powerful economic argument that prisons are not more effective than spending the money to invest in these young people on the front end.”

*– James Roland,
Director of Community Outreach and Engaged
Scholarship for the Barkley Forum, Emory University*

Boys to men

“Young Black man”: Symposium speakers agreed that this label carries a stigma that burdens African-American boys as they begin their journey into adulthood. “Because these little souls are Black, they are treated differently,” said **David Wall Rice**, Associate Professor of Psychology at Morehouse College. “There is a master narrative that defines them as pathological, as deficient, as less than and as other than the norm.” Black males, these racist messages insist, are ineducable at best, criminal at worst, capable of success only in sports, entertainment or illegal endeavors. So pernicious are these stereotypes that symposium speakers wondered aloud whether even discussing the problems of Black males — the low test scores, the high dropout rates, the odds of imprisonment — ran the risk of worsening their situation by reinforcing a picture of failure.

“These stereotypes are poisonous, and they really undermine kids’ sense of themselves and their potential for being successful. Their vision of what they can become gets very, very narrow and circumscribed.”

– *Mia Smith-Bynum,*
Associate Professor of Family Science, School of Public Health, University of Maryland at College Park

“What does it feel like to be a problem?” asked symposium speaker **Tyrone Howard**, a professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Los Angeles, quoting W.E.B. Du Bois. With so many voices defining Black masculinity in negative terms, too many Black boys internalize damaging messages. “These stereotypes are poisonous, and they really undermine kids’ sense of themselves and their potential for being successful,” said speaker **Mia Smith-Bynum**, a clinical psychologist in the School

of Public Health at the University of Maryland in College Park, whose research examines parenting and the formation of racial identity. “Their vision of what they can become gets very, very narrow and circumscribed.” Both the poor and the relatively affluent are susceptible to this damage, she added: “Class does not shield kids from these images.”

“If teachers watch television, if teachers go to the movies, if they watch the news, they probably go into their classroom with some misconceptions about African-American males. We have to clear up these misconceptions.”

– *Arnetha Ball,*
Professor of Education, Stanford University

The negative stereotyping that hurts the self-esteem of Black boys also can influence their teachers, who absorb cultural messages telling them that Black boys are violent, apathetic about education, or incapable of learning. “In order to change low levels of achievement for African-American males, we must first change the attitudes of many of the teachers who are working with African-American males in middle school,” said symposium speaker **Arnetha Ball**, Professor of Education at Stanford University. “I’m not bashing teachers — not at all. If teachers watch television, if teachers go to the movies, if they watch the news, they probably go into their classroom with some misconceptions about African-American males. We have to clear up these misconceptions.” Speakers said that the stereotypes teachers absorb may leave them expecting little — or little good — from their African-American male students, in marked contrast to the high expectations teachers typically have for their middle-class White students. Perhaps most perniciously, some teachers learn to fear their Black male students,

even those as young as middle school age. “There is a misconception that, as soon as our Black boys hit adolescence, they become automatic thugs,” said **Meria Carstarphen**, Superintendent of Austin Independent School District. “You will never teach a child if you are afraid to say, ‘Put away your cell phone,’ because you don’t think you know how to manage that kid.”

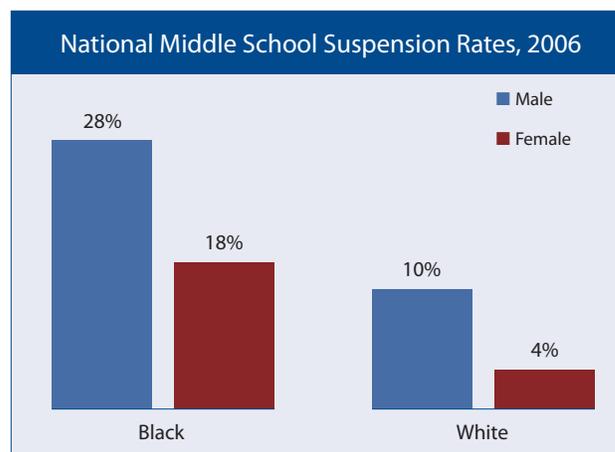
Symposium speakers showed how these negative images of Black masculinity have repercussions both inside and outside the classroom. Inside the classroom, teachers who have absorbed these stereotypes may not believe their Black male students can succeed, and children who pick up those discouraging messages will likely be hindered academically. “It’s not that they don’t want to be intelligent,” said Rice, the Morehouse psychology professor. “It’s that they don’t want to be in spaces that regard them as being less than human and that marginalize them.” Outside the classroom, the assumption that African-American boys are inherently dangerous in a way that White children are not translates into excessive punishments, including suspension and expulsion, for school infractions — punishments that far exceed those meted out to other children.

“Over a very long period of time, we err on the side of heavy-handed criminalization of our Black boys’ behavior.”

*– Meria Carstarphen, Superintendent,
Austin Independent School District*

In Austin, Carstarphen noticed that, for a White student, scrawling graffiti might draw a penalty of community service and a mandatory apology; for a Black student, the same offense might translate into a phone call to the police, a misdemeanor charge and a trip to juvenile court. In cases where school officials had

Figure 3



Note: Suspension rates count the number of students suspended at least one time during a school year.

Source: Daniel J. Losen and Russel J. Skiba, *Suspended Education: Urban Middle Schools in Crisis*, Montgomery, AL: Southern poverty Law Center, 2010.

discretion over how to punish infractions, she found that Black students were far more likely than White ones to be sent away from their home schools to an alternative school. “Over a very long period of time, we err on the side of heavy-handed criminalization of our Black boys’ behavior,” said Carstarphen, who pushed her district to eliminate exclusion from school as a punishment for less serious offenses.

Speakers at the symposium said that heavy-handed school discipline feeds African-American boys into a pipeline that ultimately deposits them behind bars, as boys who have been repeatedly and harshly punished conclude that no one believes in them, and then give up looking for a better path. Powerful political and fiscal interests benefit from the steady supply of Black male prisoners, speakers argued. “It’s in middle school when boys start to become men,” said Mason, the President of the Southern University System, “and the American business model is to drive Black men into prison.” Memphis City Schools Superintendent **Kriner Cash** said he clashed more often with the city’s chief of police and district attorney than he did with parents of schoolchildren. “The human warehouse business is a big, big business,” Cash said. “I want to

go schoolroom to boardroom, not schoolhouse to jailhouse. I want to put the jailhouse out of business.”

Defeated by school

Academically, middle school Black boys are struggling. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the test sometimes called “The Nation’s Report Card,” only 13 percent of fourth-grade Black boys score proficient in reading, compared with 40 percent of White boys. The gap is no smaller in eighth grade, when 11 percent of Black boys and 37 percent of White boys score proficient. Because males typically develop verbal skills more slowly than females do, boys may fall behind in the early years of schooling, when students are first learning to read, said Ball, the Stanford education professor. By middle school, students are assumed to have acquired relatively high levels of literacy, and those who haven’t will fall further and further behind — not only in school, but also in their adult life. “Literacy is absolutely a fundamental skill that you have to have if you’re going to be successful in the higher grades, as well as the workplace,” said speaker **Sharon Washington**, Executive Director of the National Writing Project. “I’d like to think that we still had well-paying manufacturing or agriculture jobs, but we don’t. Most of those jobs are someplace else now.”

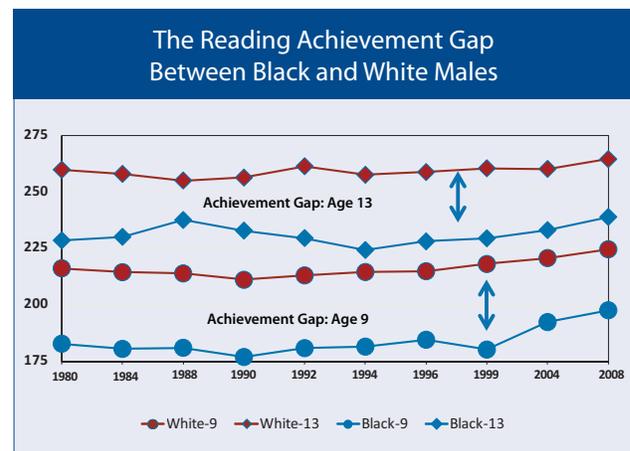
Black boys’ low test scores are not due solely to poverty — “Middle-class Black boys are still below proficiency in terms of reading, so it’s not just a question of socioeconomic status,” said symposium moderator **Mary Evans Sias**, the President of Kentucky State University — but the well-documented deficiencies of high-poverty schools clearly contribute to the problem. Black boys often attend schools where the curriculum emphasizes low-level thinking skills and classwork consists of filling out dittoed worksheets, an approach that “is going to disengage anyone,” said Howard of UCLA.

“Middle-class Black boys are still below proficiency in terms of reading, so it’s not just a question of socioeconomic status.”

*– Mary Evans Sias, President,
Kentucky State University*

Symposium speakers argued that the quality of teaching is crucial to students’ school success, and Black boys are more likely than other students to have teachers who are unqualified to teach them. Middle school teachers seldom learn how to teach reading and writing effectively to Black boys, said Stanford education professor Ball, because most instructors in teacher education programs don’t know how to do it themselves. And too many Black boys have teachers who lack experience working in diverse communities, or who took jobs in inner-city schools because they couldn’t find work elsewhere. Symptomatic of the problem is the dearth of minority teachers — speaker **Brandon Corley**, who teaches at a New York City high school, introduced himself to the symposium audience as “one of the 2 percent,” a member of the small cadre

Figure 4



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences, National Center for Educational Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1980, 1984, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2004, 2008 Long-Term Trend Reading Assessments. This report was generated using the NAEP Data Explorer. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>

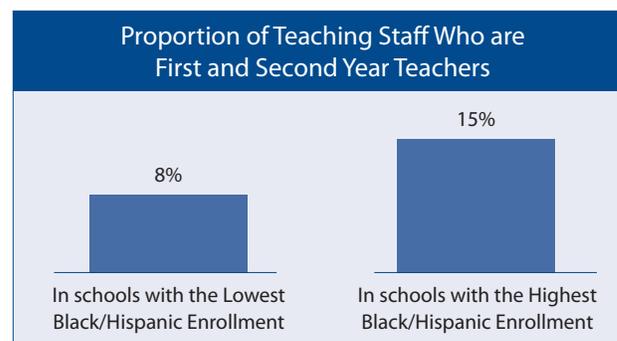
of Black male public school teachers. “I became a Black male math teacher — there’s like six of us in the country,” he joked. In middle school, where students face new academic and behavioral expectations, boys who lack classroom mentors and role models for negotiating those heightened standards can run into trouble, especially when, like 57 percent of middle school-age Black boys, they go home to single mothers, said Roland of Emory University. But speakers also warned against teachers’ seeing themselves as missionaries tasked with rescuing suffering children. “You’re not a savior,” Corley said. “You are a teacher. You’re not there to save their lives. You’re there to give them the tools that they need to save their own lives.”

“What we know from the research is that, while students drop out in high school, that decision is typically made in middle school.”

*– Tyrone Howard, Professor,
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies,
University of California at Los Angeles*

Of course, all children benefit when their schools offer engaging curricula, tailor instruction to their needs, and field a staff of dedicated and effective teachers. But for Black boys, the stakes are higher: By the time they graduate from middle school, many have already fallen so far behind that they have lost interest, or lost heart. “What we know from the research is that, while students drop out in high school, that decision is typically made in middle school,” said Howard, the UCLA education professor. Speaking of the students who arrive in his classroom, Corley said, “I’m trying to encourage them. I’m trying to build them up and let them know, ‘You’re capable, you can do anything.’ I give them those encouraging words, but they already know: ‘I have not been prepared in middle school. I have not

Figure 5



Source: Office for Civil Rights, *Revealing New Truths about Our Nation's Schools*, U.S. Department of Education, March 2012.

been prepared in high school. There’s nothing you can say to me right now that is going to change my life course.’ A lot of our students are defeated already.”

Forging a counter-narrative

Helping Black boys flourish despite the pressures they will encounter in the middle school years is an urgent task for parents and educators alike. Speakers said that African-American boys need psychological armor to shield them from the negative messages about Black masculinity that they will inevitably encounter. “We have to spend a lot of time providing young people with a counter-narrative,” said Roland of Emory University, and that counter-narrative needs to include an understanding of the historical context that has shaped the lives of Black men, said psychologist Smith-Bynum. “They have to know that this stuff didn’t happen by accident, that there’s been a structured, intentional set of policies and laws and practices in our country that have created this problem — this is not me,” she said. “Without that knowledge, you’re just cast into the sea, and you’ve got to figure out how to swim with no type of protection at all.” Rice, the Morehouse psychology professor, said that if friends accuse them of “acting White” by speaking standard English and valuing education, children need to know

enough about the achievements of African-American writers, scholars and activists to argue back, to insist that “it is cool to be smart, and it’s acting Black.”

Research shows that, while Black parents spend much time teaching their sons how to negotiate potentially dangerous encounters with authority figures, it is their daughters in whom they inculcate most fully an appreciation of African-American culture and heritage, Smith-Bynum said. Sons need to hear those same lessons in cultural pride, she said. Parents need to actively seek out role models who shatter negative stereotypes of African-American lives. “If we’re not seeing anyone who’s lived in a way that we might want our kids to aspire to, they won’t necessarily know how to do it,” she said. “You can’t leave it to chance.” At Morehouse College, summer and Saturday programs offer enrichment and SAT® preparation for local children, and students at Morehouse and nearby Spelman College act as mentors. The college students “represent the survivors,” said symposium speaker **Robert Franklin**, Morehouse’s President, “and I want them to use their ego strength and their life lessons to inspire and instruct younger children.”

Across the country, educators are experimenting with new ways of organizing schools to promote the achievement of Black boys — in some cases, by reconsidering once-standard models that earlier generations cast aside. Until the 1960s, children of middle school age typically stayed in the same school from kindergarten through eighth grade, said symposium speaker **Jerry Weast**, a consultant who spent 12 years as superintendent of the public schools in Montgomery County, Maryland. When K–8 schools became too crowded as students flooded in during the Baby Boom years, districts abandoned the traditional structure and built separate junior high schools. But this new approach forced students to make not one

but two problematic school-to-school transitions, increasing the chances for vulnerable children to fall through the cracks. More transitions mean more opportunities for learning loss, Weast said, and learning loss hits boys and low-income children hardest. “If I could just go in with a magic wand, I absolutely would tie my pre-K all the way to the eighth grade in one complete articulation,” Austin Superintendent Carstarphen said. But parents often fight efforts to put middle school students in the same building as elementary school students, she said, apparently fearing that the older students will somehow corrupt or endanger the younger ones. “Often, today, parents are pushing back against it,” she said, “even though we have all the academic data to show that having a less broken-up articulation is better for the kids.”

Another educational model that symposium speakers said may hold promise for Black boys is single-sex schooling, which advocates say strengthens community bonds and fosters a culture of academic achievement. In Austin, Carstarphen hopes to launch three new single-sex schools, one for girls and two for boys, to join the district’s existing all-girls secondary school, which has proved highly successful. And two of the Children’s Defense Fund’s Freedom Schools — free summer and after-school enrichment programs that target low-income and minority children — serve Black boys only; ETS has helped fund both, in Newark, New Jersey, and Orangeburg, South Carolina. Single-sex schools “tend to focus the attention of boys on being smart and cool without the distraction of having to impress girls in the classroom,” said Franklin, the President of all-male Morehouse. In past generations, said Canada of the Harlem Children’s Zone, the presence of girls in the classroom helped improve boys’ behavior — “a lot of us, as boys, straightened up because the girls weren’t having it” — but the hypersexualization of contemporary culture has changed that dynamic, he

said. However, speakers said, the data on single-sex schooling is mixed, with some studies finding little impact on academic outcomes. Successful models of single-sex education have a clear theory of change undergirding their operations, said Howard of UCLA. Such schools need strong community support to succeed, and they may not work in every context.

“Black boys can learn just as much as anybody if you make it fun and interesting and demanding. Don’t take the rigor out of it, but make it relevant and of interest to them.”

*— Kriner Cash, Superintendent,
Memphis City Schools*

However schools are organized, to keep Black boys on the right path, those schools must present a rich curriculum in an engaging, culturally responsive way. “The problem we are trying to solve is that we’re not preparing or inspiring the child,” said Weast, the former Montgomery County Superintendent. “When children are inspired, they’ll come to school. When they’re prepared, they’ll go to higher levels.” Inspiring Black boys requires a curriculum that connects to their lives and their interests. Cash, the Memphis Superintendent, said that “Black boys can learn just as much as anybody if you make it fun and interesting and demanding. Don’t take the rigor out of it, but make it relevant and of interest to them.” That might mean building a reading lesson around the lyrics to a rap song, said Corley, the New York City teacher, or asking students to read *We Beat the Street*, a nonfiction account of three impoverished African-American boys from Newark who grew up to become doctors, a book that Corley encountered while working in a CDF Freedom School. The Freedom Schools, which present a literacy-rich curriculum in a way that engages the

interest of low-income and minority children, provided important training that he took with him to his first public-school classroom, Corley said. “I had a lot more tricks in my bag than my first-year colleagues had.”

Extracurricular programs, from chess teams to music ensembles, also carry the potential to tie Black boys to school and keep them on a positive path, speakers said. At Emory, Roland works with debate teams from urban school districts, drawing on a rich African-American tradition of excellence in rhetoric. “Middle school youngsters typically want to be part of something,” said Cash, the Memphis Superintendent. “I say, ‘I want you in a gang, but I want you in a good gang’ — the jazz band, say, rather than the Vice Lords.

Mentors and role models

Symposium speakers discussed the need to put more Black male teachers into classrooms serving Black boys. Mason, the Southern University System President, is spearheading the Five-Fifths Agenda for America, an initiative whose aims include increasing the number of Black men receiving bachelor’s degrees and becoming teachers. But efforts to diversify the teaching corps run up against American society’s long-standing devaluation of the teaching profession, speakers said, which makes such a career path less enticing for talented Black college graduates. “It breaks my heart when I’m in schools and I hear teachers discouraging students from going into teaching,” said Washington of the National Writing Project, which trains thousands of teachers each year in writing instruction. To make teaching a more attractive career, conference participants advocated an array of strategies, including a social media campaign designed to raise the status of the profession, and loan forgiveness and signing bonuses for college graduates who choose to teach. The nation’s 104 Historically Black Colleges and

Universities also should take a lead role in the effort to recruit more Black male teachers. But the bottom line, some argued, is financial. “Until teachers earn more money, we will not ever have the number of teachers that we really need, and especially Black men,” said symposium speaker **Wanda Hutchinson**, Associate Professor of Education at Athens State University. “Strong men want to be able to take care of their families, and when they look at a salary as a teacher with a bachelor’s degree or a master’s degree, and they compare that with the salary of an engineer or an accountant or a lawyer, it’s a no-brainer.”

Teacher-education programs have a special responsibility to prepare more minority teachers, and to better prepare White teachers to educate Black boys, Hutchinson said. Recruitment of teacher candidates should start with high school or even middle school students. Since minority teacher candidates have more trouble passing state teacher-licensing exams than do White candidates, Hutchinson argued that teacher-education programs should attack that problem aggressively, providing mentoring and practice tests to minority teaching candidates from the beginning of their studies. Classroom-management courses should address the problem of the disproportionately harsh discipline often administered to Black boys, she said, and preparatory programs also need to include more material on gender-, race- and culture-specific pedagogy. White female teacher candidates often tell her that they don’t see color when they look at their students, wrongly believing that this is what she wants to hear. “When they don’t see color, they disregard Black boys,” Hutchinson said. “They ignore Black boys.”

However promising the innovative approaches that schools are trying, no one method is likely to work for all children. “We sometimes search for the Holy Grail of understanding,” said Roland of Emory. “The reality

is that there is no cookie-cutter approach.” Rather, educators and advocates must develop a toolbox of strategies that can be adapted to different contexts, he said. And although no one strategy may work in all situations, many strategies may work in some. As Cash, the Memphis Superintendent, said, “It has to start with a belief, it has to start with an expectation. And once you do that, many structures work. It’s not the structure — it’s the time. It’s what you do in the structure. It’s what you do with the time. Our children need more focused time in a supportive, caring, focused, disciplined environment where they’re learning.”

“Until teachers earn more money, we will not ever have the number of teachers that we really need, and especially Black men.”

*– Wanda Hutchinson,
Associate Professor of Education,
Athens State University*

Although African-American middle school boys face special challenges, what they need from their schools is not especially unusual; it’s what all children need from their schools. “At the end of the day, authentic, caring, competent, highly qualified teachers, no matter the gender, no matter the race, have a profound impact on the outcomes for Black males,” said Howard of UCLA. “What works for Black males . . . is not significantly different from what works for other groups of students.”

Anecdotal evidence for Howard’s point came midway through the CDF conference, during the gala “Beat the Odds” dinner, at which CDF presented five Ohio students who had overcome poverty, homelessness and family dysfunction with \$5,000 college scholarships, one of them funded by ETS. In a video biography, one of the students, De’Von Jennings, who spent years in foster care after his mother died

and his father abused him, spoke warmly about the high school teacher who had brought him food when he was hungry, advocated for him in family court and nominated him for the CDF scholarship.

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– Tyrone Howard, Professor, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, University of California at Los Angeles

The forgotten years

Despite their importance, the middle school years often have been the forgotten years for policy advocates and academic researchers. Education reformers have focused on the importance of early childhood education, and on raising high school graduation and college retention rates, neglecting the years in between, said Canada of the Harlem Children’s Zone. And little research looks specifically at either middle school children in general or middle school Black boys in particular, speakers said. What research does exist on middle school Black boys focuses on criminality, said Smith-Bynum of the University of Maryland; very little has been done on the factors that predict positive development and school success in Black boys. Researchers need to undertake quantitative and qualitative studies of these predictors, she said, as well as longitudinal studies following Black boys from early childhood. “What’s happening that causes the light to go out for our kids between the ages

of 9 to 12?” she asked. “That’s when we lose a lot of boys.” To do studies like these, academics will need to partner with communities, she said, and forging such partnerships will require overcoming a legacy of suspicion born out of the sometimes exploitative past relationships between researchers and their subjects. Community groups should ask their potential academic partners what they do in their own institutions to foster the success of Black students. “If they don’t have an answer to this,” Smith-Bynum advised, “tell them to talk to the hand, not to the face.”

Symposium speakers agreed that the struggles of Black boys, and of the men they will grow up to be, are evidence of moral failure in a wealthy country that has the power — and ought to have the political will — to ensure equal opportunity for all its citizens. Ultimately, the country can’t afford to shortchange its middle school Black boys. “It’s not just a problem for communities of color,” said Roland of Emory University. “This is an American problem, because these young people that are falling by the wayside are young people that truly have the potential to change our trajectory.”

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– James Roland, Director of Community Outreach and Engaged Scholarship for the Barkley Forum, Emory University





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single-sex classes and culturally attuned curricula; teacher-education programs need to recruit more Black men into the profession; and researchers need to identify pathways to success.

That was the message of “Middle School Matters: Improving the Life Course of Black Boys,” the second in a series of four symposia, co-sponsored by ETS and the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF), designed to address the education and status of African-American males from birth to age 24. The first symposium, held in Washington, D.C., in June 2011, focused on early childhood and elementary school; later sessions will look at the high school and college years. The symposium on middle school education, held July 23–24, 2012, in Cincinnati, Ohio, during CDF’s

national conference, featured presentations by 14 academics, advocates and school officials. Sessions were moderated by **Lezli Baskerville**, President of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education; **Alvin Irby**, Education Director of the Boys’ Club of New York; ETS Senior Vice President **Michael Nettles**; and **Mary Evans Sias**, President of Kentucky State University. The four symposia on African-American males make up part of ETS’s ongoing series of “Addressing Achievement Gaps” conferences, launched in 2003.

More information about the symposium on middle school, including PowerPoint® slides, is available at https://www.ets.org/s/achievement_gap/conferences/middle_school_matters/overview.html.