



# BEING BLACK

IS NOT A RISK FACTOR:



*Including a foreword  
written by*  
**JUDGE DORIS A. SMITH-RIBNER**



**STATISTICS AND  
STRENGTHS-BASED  
SOLUTIONS IN  
THE STATE OF  
PENNSYLVANIA**



**BCDI**  
Black Child Development Institute  
PHILADELPHIA

**PENNSYLVANIA**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### 01 The Voice of Victory

Tobeka G. Green  
*President & CEO, NBCDI*

### 02 Foreword: 'Knowledge Is the Prime Need of the Hour': The Role of the Black Church in the Fight for Educational Equity

Judge Doris A. Smith-Ribner

### 04 Disrupting Dangerous Narratives in Early Childhood Education: Being Black is Not a Risk Factor

Lori Delale-O'Connor  
H. Richard Milner

### 08 Point of Proof: Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### 14 Obstacles to Early Intervention & Special Education Services For African American Children and Families

Kimberly Railey, M.Ed.

### 18 Ensuring Pennsylvania's Children Thrive: How Investing In Smart Public Policy Pays Off For Children And Families

Joan Benso

### 22 Point of Proof: Benjamin B. Comegys Elementary School

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### 26 Achieving Healthy Weight And Freedom From Obesity-Related Health Problems In Black Children: A Call To Action

Shiriki Kumanyika, PhD, MPH

### 32 Point of Proof: Mighty Writers

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### 38 'Grow to Greatness': Using a Culturally Responsive, Afrocentric Curriculum to Cultivate Leadership Among Students

Louis Mason  
Shoshana Tyler

### 42 Point of Proof: Destined for a Dream Foundation, Inc. Program: Literacy First

Philadelphia-Lower Bucks County, Pennsylvania

### 45 Pennsylvania Policy Variables & Benchmarks

### 46 Endnotes

### 48 Acknowledgements

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## THE VOICE OF VICTORY

Since 1970, the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) has been dedicated to its mission to improve and advance the quality of life for Black children and families through education and advocacy. In the decades since, our children, families and communities have made significant progress.

While there are challenges and gaps that remain in our communities, which give renewed urgency to our work, despair is not the story being written. In spite of persistent gaps that remain in our systems, there are many success stories in our communities that rebut the prevailing discourse and shatter negative stereotypes about Black children and families.

In 2013, NBCDI released its report, *“Being Black is Not a Risk Factor: A Strengths-Based Look at the State of the Black Child,”* to take back and reframe the narrative about Black children, which overemphasizes limitations and deficits and does not recognize the admirable strengths, talents and resilience demonstrated by our children, families and communities.

Since then, we have turned to the states, working with our National Affiliate Network, to develop reports that assess and address the strengths and needs of Black children and families where they live. Like the national report and the state reports before it, *“Being Black is Not a Risk Factor: Statistics and Strengths-Based Solutions in the State of Pennsylvania,”* serves as an important resource for policymakers, advocates, practitioners, parents and caregivers alike.

The report weaves together three critical elements:

1. **Essays** by experts from across the state that focus on using our children’s, families’ and communities’ strengths to improve outcomes for Black children
2. **Points of Proof** from organizations in Pennsylvania that provide examples of places where Black children are succeeding
3. **Data** that indicates how Pennsylvania’s Black children and families are doing across a range of measures and in relation to their peers both within the state and nationally.

To achieve our vision for the report, we tapped into the innovation, dedication and creativity of contributors in an array of fields critical to Black children and families; engaging a wide-range of unique perspectives and capitalizing on the diversity of thought and ideas in our midst. Importantly, this report also shines a light on the roll-up-your-sleeves, grassroots work needed to change outcomes for Black children and families and puts faces on the children—often forgotten—behind the statistics. This helps to change the way we see ourselves, and the way the world sees us; it gives us back our voice and our power.

I am grateful for and inspired by the work of so many who have joined with us here and over the years, and who stand ready with that power, as well as their passion and vision to support our children, strengthen our families and define the future of our communities, nation and world.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tobeka G. Green'.

**TOBEKA G. GREEN**  
President & CEO, NBCDI

**Foreword:**

# **‘KNOWLEDGE IS THE PRIME NEED OF THE HOUR’:**

## **The Role of the Black Church in the Fight for Educational Equity<sup>1</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>This foreword is excerpted from a longer essay.*

**JUDGE DORIS A. SMITH-RIBNER**

(Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court, Ret.)

Commissioner

President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for African Americans

**T**he history of the Black church demonstrates that it was the center of moral leadership, courage and strength for the community and that it was a pivotal leader in the civil rights movement and struggles for racial equality. It was the Black church that educated Black children long before any laws were passed mandating states to educate all children. As early as the late 1790s and early 1800s, churches such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church began schools to educate Black children in Philadelphia. In the present day, Black churches continue to provide full-day academic schools and/or after-school programs to supplement the full-day school learning experiences of Black children.

Due in large part to the advocacy and strength of the Black church and its clergy, President Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act; these laws prohibit racial discrimination in voter registration; racial segregation in schools; discrimination in employment and in places of public accommodations; and prohibit discrimination in voting. The Black church collaborated with the NAACP and other groups that waged legal battles through the courts on the discriminatory admissions policies of colleges and universities, and later developed legal strategies to mount an attack on racially discriminatory admissions policies in public school systems that led to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The Black church was at the epicenter of these movements.

**It is the state’s obligation to provide the means for high quality and equal education for all of its children. The role of faith communities, nonetheless, is critical in supporting academic achievement and educational outcomes for Black children.**

In addition to its teachings, the Black church historically has functioned as a place of refuge and support for community values and for the education of its children. Recognizing the faith community’s contribution to societal benefits, current and past White House administrations have made efforts to develop partnerships with the faith community to promote civic, educational and social programs. This acknowledgement is exemplified through 13 federal agency faith-based offices that exist under the current White House Office of Faith-Based Partnerships, including the faith-based office in the Department of Education. This trend is buttressed by the transformative power of the Black church, motivating clergy leaders located in Philadelphia and elsewhere to join efforts to support the President’s educational excellence initiatives, help improve academic achievement and expand educational outcomes of Black children in the public schools.

As a result, a group of clergy leaders from the African Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, Baptist and other religious denominations joined in my vision to establish a faith-based educational enrichment initiative. It includes development of after-school programs with rigorous academic content and activities that increase student literacy and math and science skills to promote grade-level reading and expand student access to informal STEM education. The My Brother’s Keeper Report and a plethora of other studies emphasize the need to prepare





children to read on grade level by 3rd or even 4th grade to ensure their chances for success in school. Moreover, recognizing the correlation between regular school attendance and academic achievement, an unprecedented and coordinated Education Message from the Pulpit recently was launched in Philadelphia and adopted by faith communities to encourage regular school attendance in addition to increased family engagement and parental involvement in schools. To further the vision, additional strategies focus on improving student school attendance and academic achievement. The clergy and faith communities must be applauded for continuing their historical role as leaders in this nation.

It is the state's obligation to provide the means for high quality and equal education for all of its children. The role of faith communities, nonetheless, is critical in supporting academic achievement and educational outcomes for Black children, and in demanding that the schools provide them with rigorous coursework to build strong reading and writing skills along with math, science and advanced placement learning experiences; effective, well-trained and qualified teachers who communicate high expectations and recognition of the students' talents, abilities and scholarship; and fairly, properly funded schools and resources customarily provided to their peers. Moreover, students' parents or caregivers must be actively engaged in their children's education at every stage and, to that end, Black children must stay in school, work hard, graduate high school and pursue post-secondary education or career training to increase their chances for success in life.

It is our collective responsibility to ensure that Black children receive a high quality education, on equal terms with all other students, that prepares them for post-secondary education and training, and to assume their responsibilities in society. In her 1954 Last Will & Testament, noted educator and world leader Dr. Mary McCloud Bethune left a great legacy to her people:

*"I leave you a thirst for education. Knowledge is the prime need of the hour. I leave you finally a responsibility to our young people. They must not be discouraged from aspiring toward greatness, for they are to be the leaders of tomorrow."*

We must see to it that Black children reap the benefits of that legacy.

# DISRUPTING DANGEROUS NARRATIVES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:

## Being Black is Not a Risk Factor

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### INTRODUCTION

In this essay, we attempt to disrupt a pervasive, “dangerous” narrative that suggests that race does not matter and is inconsequential in early childhood education. Rather, we stress that it is essential for us to understand race and racial identity among young children in order to better serve them effectively. Indeed, there is evidence that has shown racial identity is strongly linked with academic achievement.<sup>1</sup> From the Clark “doll tests” of the 1940s to studies showing that infants prefer similar “same race” faces, we know that young children are aware of and react to racial differences.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup> Moreover, as educators, parents and advocates of young children, we also see and hear it in their actions and interactions. Ethnographic accounts have shown that young children (2.5 to 3 years old) are aware of and may even “hide” racial comments and actions from adults.<sup>6</sup> Yet, early childhood educators may shy away from centralizing race and adopt a colorblind approach to avoid “exposing” young children to what they may perceive as adult issues.<sup>7,8</sup>

When educators adopt colorblind approaches in their work, they ignore racial differences and invalidate who Black children are and can be. We live in a multi-racial society, and matters of race filter down to even the youngest members. But why do adults tend to avoid deepening their knowledge and skill to respond to issues of race with young children? Early childhood and elementary years offer opportunities for interventions to address racism, as well as to build a solid

**It is critical that educators recognize the various range of assets that Black families and children bring to the classroom, as well as potential differences in engagement and connections that draw from these assets and differences.**

foundation for positive racial identity development.<sup>9,10,11</sup> As such, we stress that educators who work with young Black children need to convey to them that #BlackLivesMatter and that being Black is not a “risk factor” for failure. Educators should help tear down negative stereotypes about Black children and their families.

Despite its attempt to be “neutral,” adopting a colorblind approach treats the acknowledgment of racial differences as something negative.<sup>12,13</sup> Too often, however, early childhood and elementary educators—including teachers, leaders and staff—are not trained to talk about or include race in their classrooms. They adopt this colorblind approach because they don’t know what else to do.<sup>14</sup> Here, we provide a brief overview of the ways in which race matters in early childhood and elementary classrooms and offer recommendations for educators to adopt positive, race-conscious approaches in their schools and classrooms.

### HOW DOES RACE MATTER FOR THE EARLY AND ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM?

Racial differences play a role in early childhood settings in the ways that children are socialized, disciplined and evaluated in classrooms and informal settings. For example, we know that the disciplinary disparities between Black and White children start as early as pre-K—with African American pre-K students comprising 48% of those suspended more than once even though African Americans are only 18% of the pre-K population.<sup>15</sup> The most recent data from the Commonwealth of





**TABLE 1. Percentage of African American public school students in Pennsylvania receiving disciplinary actions (2011-12)**

DISCIPLINARY ACTION	PERCENTAGE OF K-12 BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS RECEIVING DISCIPLINARY ACTION
Corporal Punishment	27.4
One or More In-school Suspensions	27.1
One or More Out-of-School Suspensions	42.8
Expulsions With or Without Educational Services	37.1
Referral to Law Enforcement	28.4
School-related Arrests	38.9

Pennsylvania mirrors these trends for Black children across the K-12 landscape (See Table 1). Black students made up just over 15% of the school population in Pennsylvania in the 2011-2012 school year; in that same year, they received 27% to nearly 43% of various disciplinary actions.

To be clear, when educators are not committed to understanding race, they may miss opportunities to respond to these unfortunate disciplinary realities that leave Black students excluded from the learning environment. In addition to the direct relationship between disciplinary actions and the school to prison pipeline,<sup>16,17,18</sup> we also know that these interactions inform the ways that children feel about themselves, as well as their academic and developmental outcomes.<sup>19</sup> *Across the literature, we see support for the importance of developing positive racial identity early in life.* These outcomes are, in part, connected to the instruction and interaction that children receive in their early childhood classrooms.

### HOW CAN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND ELEMENTARY EDUCATORS ACKNOWLEDGE RACE AND ADOPT RACE-CONSCIOUS PRACTICES?

**Be aware of racial biases and the “hidden” curriculum in your school and classroom**—We know it is differential treatment (rather than different behaviors) that results in the disproportionate disciplinary referral of Black students.<sup>20,21</sup> Awareness of one’s biases, as well as the ways in which racism is institutionalized and manifest in our schools, is a critical step for all educators. Developing lenses to understand bias begins with critical self-reflection among educators themselves.

Educators must ask important questions about their own racial identity, privileges, and power. For instance, how do educators’ own racial identity influence the ways in which they understand and interpret referral decisions of their students?

**Make connections and recognize the strengths and assets of Black families and the Black community**—Black children’s primary support systems—their families—can be devalued and excluded (both unintentionally and not) by the formal education system.<sup>22,23,24</sup> It is critical that educators recognize the various range of assets that Black families and children bring to the classroom, as well as potential differences in engagement style, and create opportunities for building engagement and connections that draw from these assets and differences.<sup>25</sup> In particular, studies have shown that Black families who demonstrate strong familial/kin support—extended beyond the nuclear family to include both extended family and community—are more likely to engage in home-based teaching/learning and to demonstrate support for racial awareness and positive racial development.<sup>26</sup> These are strengths that can benefit both the classroom and individual child development.

**Building a strong pipeline**—In addition to districts, schools and individuals taking the steps described above to support educators already in the classroom, it is essential to build a strong pipeline of future educators with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to successfully nurture Black children. Building a Black teacher pipeline means that we are working deliberately to *recruit and retain more Black teachers and teachers of color*. The most recently available data indicate that in the 2011-2012 school year, just under 16% of the United States’ (U.S.) student population identified as Black/African American; in that same year, 7% of the U.S. teaching force identified as Black/African American. Similarly, in Pennsylvania, just over 15% of the student population identified as Black/African American, while just 2% of the teaching population did the same.<sup>27</sup> Literature demonstrates that teachers of color provide strong role models for students and are able to draw from similar lived experience.<sup>28</sup> However, being the same race does not mean a teacher and student will automatically connect, or that race and equity will automatically become part of the classroom.<sup>29,30</sup> *All pre-service teachers need to have diverse opportunities and experiences during their practicum and pre-placement training.* Seeing a range of settings and student development while engaging in a supportive, race-conscious educator preparation program could contribute to equipping teachers with professional competencies needed to better serve Black children and families.<sup>31</sup>







**Develop and sustain professional development**—Regardless of the racial identity of early childhood educators, supporting them with tools to help build strong, positive racial identity is essential. Educators need ongoing professional development to learn how to address issues of race with young children in developmentally appropriate ways. In particular, they need to develop tools and strategies to help all students experience learning opportunities that validate and confirm their existence, and the possibilities for their lives. This professional development must be ongoing and sustained.

### CONCLUSIONS

The education that occurs in the early childhood and elementary years is critical to helping both Black children and children of other races understand that being Black is not a “risk factor.” Educators must engage in addressing race, and supporting students in disrupting discourses that would suggest they are inferior. Otherwise, Black students internalize lies about themselves and their potential. The time to act is now, and the issues are pervasive. We can no longer afford to avoid conversations and practices that center race. Our children’s lives depend, in part, on our ability to be courageous enough to shift our discourses and practices in ways that might better support all students in realizing and reaching their full capacity to learn and succeed in life.

**The education that occurs in the early childhood and elementary years is critical to helping both Black children and children of other races understand that being Black is not a risk factor.**

**Point of Proof:**

# BOYS' LATIN OF PHILADELPHIA CHARTER SCHOOL

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

## WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT "A POINT OF PROOF?"

Boys' Latin of Philadelphia boasts a near 100 percent college acceptance rate for all graduates since its inception in 2007. Of those accepted, more than 80 percent enroll in college the fall after high school graduation and persistence rates are trending ahead of the national average. We achieve these outcomes with a student population of young men truly representative of the racial and socio-economic diversity of Philadelphia.

## WHAT IS THIS PROJECT'S ELEVATOR SPEECH?

Boys' Latin of Philadelphia, a college preparatory school, is dedicated to serving boys who live in the City of Philadelphia. We are committed to fostering our students' success through college graduation, and that begins with a strong academic foundation. Our faculty drives instruction based upon data. Boys' Latin offers students a rigorous classical education using contemporary pedagogy that prepares them for college matriculation and sets high standards for achievement, character development, and emotional intelligence. Furthermore, we emphasize the value of brotherhood. The school nurtures a community of young men who value academic success, hard work, and the development of their intellectual, moral, social, creative, and athletic potential.

Boys' Latin is a school where young men prepare to become leaders through challenging coursework within a supportive environment. Our curriculum blends liberal arts, classical studies, and state-of-the-art technology as we cultivate world citizens for the twenty-first century. We believe that through courage, curiosity, compassion, integrity, and perseverance, our students will embrace our mantra

that Every Man is the Architect of His Own Fortune. Importantly, Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School welcomes all who share our mission for children. We do not discriminate based on external or perceived differences, but empower our young men with a rewarding and diverse school program.

Core values of Boys' Latin are ensuring we create a climate for scholarship, community and family connections, and powerful learning opportunities for our young men and families we serve.

Boys' Latin is committed to the belief that learning should take place in a supportive, structured, safe environment that provides a challenging curriculum, effective resources, and a code of conduct that promotes respect for self and others. We work to ensure our students learn and grow in an environment that protects, challenges, and nurtures each one as a worthy individual.

At Boys' Latin we recognize that student learning happens best when there is a partnership between educators, students, and parents. We strive to ensure that each member of the alliance composing our school community has a voice in how we evolve as an organization; we strive to maintain a culture where diversity—of people, opinion, and perspective—is valued and recognized for its ability to make us stronger; and we strive to understand and support each student along his unique developmental path. The partnership between parents, teachers, and students at our school is the foundation that enables each of our young men to be the architect of his own fortune.

Young men enrolled at Boys' Latin are engaged in daily opportunities to analyze and think critically and creatively; to understand and use various technologies; to grapple with challenging questions within and across disciplines; and to develop curiosity and enthusiasm about learning. Boys' Latin is a place where students view writing as a life skill; a place where students engage in a host of extracurricular enrichment, and skill-building activities as part of their educational experience; and a place where students recognize the value of self and the value of community. The students of Boys' Latin are in the midst of creating a legacy.

To date, by adhering to our core values with stringent integrity, we have graduated close to 100 percent of young men since our first class of 2011. Of those who've graduated, close to 99 percent have been accepted to postsecondary institutions, and over 80 percent have enrolled in college the semester following high school graduation. Importantly, persistence rates are trending higher than the national average.





**WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?**

- Approximately 870 students in grades 6-12
- Class of 2016: 107
- Students come from all areas of Philadelphia
- Approximately 79% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch

**HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?**

Statistically speaking, boys are far more likely to have problematic academic experiences and are 30% more likely to drop out of school. Teachers in an all boys' school can teach effectively in ways which reach boys and appeal to their learning style. Extensive research has shown that boys tend to soften their competitive edge and become more collaborative in a single sex setting. They can just be themselves and not worry about the social stresses inherent in a co-educational environment. This allows a young man more ease in developing his full potential.

While we track key data like test scores to help inform instruction and individualize supports for our young men, the penultimate outcomes we seek/track are the successful completion of high school and enrollment in and persistence of our young men through college graduation.

**HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THE PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?****COUNT OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN COLLEGE THE FALL IMMEDIATELY AFTER HIGH SCHOOL****Effective Date = August 15, 2015**

CLASS OF	2011	2012	2013	2014
Total in the Class	82	73	76	102
Total Enrolled	61	59	64	83

**COUNT OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN COLLEGE AT ANY TIME DURING THE FIRST YEAR AFTER HIGH SCHOOL****Effective Date = August 15, 2015**

CLASS OF	2011	2012	2013	2014
Total in the Class	82	73	76	102
Total Enrolled	67	61	66	86

**COUNT OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN COLLEGE THE FIRST YEAR AFTER HIGH SCHOOL WHO RETURNED FOR A SECOND YEAR (FRESHMAN TO SOPHOMORE PERSISTENCE)****Effective Date = August 15, 2015**

CLASS OF	2011	2012	2013
Total in the Class	82	73	76
Enrolled Anywhere 1st Year	67	61	66
Enrolled Anywhere 2nd Year	41	49	53

**COUNT OF CLASS 2011 POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT AND PROGRESS****Total in the Class: 82**

ACADEMIC YEARS	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
New to College	67	0	1	0
Retained	0	41	30	20
Returned After Stop Out	0	0	2	5
No Longer Enrolled & Not Graduated	0	26	34	39
Graduated	0	0	1	4
Not in NSC to Date	15	15	14	14







**COUNT OF CLASS 2012 POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT AND PROGRESS**  
**Total in the Class: 73**

ACADEMIC YEARS	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
New to College	61	1	1
Retained	0	48	37
Returned After Stop Out	0	0	2
No Longer Enrolled & Not Graduated	0	12	21
Graduated	0	1	3
Not in NSC to Date	12	11	9

**COUNT OF CLASS 2013 POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT AND PROGRESS**  
**Total in the Class: 76**

ACADEMIC YEARS	2013-14	2014-15
New to College	66	4
Retained	0	53
Returned After Stop Out	0	0
No Longer Enrolled & Not Graduated	0	13
Graduated	0	0
Not in NSC to Date	10	6

**COUNT OF CLASS 2014 POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT AND PROGRESS**  
**Total in the Class: 102**

ACADEMIC YEARS	2014-15
New to College	85
Retained	0
Returned After Stop Out	0
No Longer Enrolled & Not Graduated	0
Graduated	1
Not in NSC to Date	16

### WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

- Five-week summer academy for entering freshmen
- All students required to study Latin for four years
- All students in grades 10-12 receive laptop computers
- Faculty/Student Ratio: 15:1
- Trimester
- Extended school day
- Bi-monthly Saturday school (mandatory for students on academic probation)

Because we expect that most of our students will pursue higher education, Boys' Latin's standard curriculum is college preparatory. The typical curriculum for a member of the Class of 2015 has been:

9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Literature I	Literature II	English 11	English 12
Composition I	Composition II	Latin III	Latin IV
Latin I	Latin II	Algebra II	Pre-Calculus
Algebra I	Geometry	Science (1 credit)	Physics
Math Reasoning	Bio/Chem II	U.S. History	Electives (3 credits)
Bio/Chem I	World History	Math Analysis	
Civics	Electives (1 credit)	Electives (1 credit)	

### WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

The greatest challenges we face involve time and money. The college admissions process seems to be becoming increasingly condensed; students are being pressured to make decisions about where they will apply earlier and earlier. Some colleges are even soliciting applications from students before their senior year begins. Our students often are not ready to decide what their major will be, or even how far from home they want to be, early in their senior year. As Early Action and Early Decision programs become increasingly popular among colleges, and the deadlines for those programs get earlier, the timeline for taking standardized tests and completing essays and applications is becoming shorter. We need time to work with students to make sure they are making the best decisions possible; sometimes the time we have just isn't enough.

The other significant challenge is money. Our students can't afford expensive test preparation courses. We try to offer as many enrichment opportunities as we can, but what we are able to do can't compare to the opportunities available to many of the students applying to the same colleges as our students.

In addition, the costs of college tuition, room and board are growing much faster than are family incomes and Federal and State grant amounts. The majority of our students come from low-income backgrounds, so our greatest challenge isn't ensuring their admission to college - it is helping them find affordable options.

Importantly, men who don't have at least two years of college are not going to be able to keep up with inflation. They will make 40-80% less than those with college degrees if there is even a job for them. We are preparing boys for the world they will face.

Eighty percent of kids go to 4-year colleges. We backed off trying to get them all in into 4-year schools as some kids aren't mature enough. A year or two at a community college and living at home is a good fit. After two years in community college, they can then matriculate at a 4-year institution when they are financially and/or emotionally more prepared.

We do our best to change the mindset of our boys by instilling in them that, "Life is not about always having a good hand, it's about playing a bad hand well." (Robert Lewis Stevenson)

### HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

- Boys' Latin receives charter school funding per student that includes college advisory costs.
- Boys' Latin raises extra money for English and math support. Additional resources are needed for students with special needs (about 10% of the students at Boys' Latin). Staff also identify students they believe would benefit from supports and provide them by raising additional funds.
- Boys' Latin also benefits from a strong fundraising board. Approximately 88% of revenue is from public dollars; 12% is raised by the board/school.



### HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

The most significant factor in the success of Boys' Latin's college advising program is the fact that we have a dedicated office for postsecondary planning. Because we don't perform other traditional guidance office responsibilities, such as scheduling and personal counseling, their college advisors are able to focus all of their time and attention on assisting students with the college process. As a result, we are able to provide college planning services to students similar to what they would receive in a much smaller, independent school. We assist students in all aspects of the college process, including developing college lists, completing applications, developing essays, applying for scholarships and completing financial aid forms.

In the Boys' Latin college advising office, we place a great deal of emphasis on building relationships with students, parents and colleges. In order to be able to counsel students effectively, we have to know them well and earn their trust. Likewise, it's important that parents understand that we are committed to promoting the best interests of their sons in this process so that we can all work together for the best outcomes. We work hard to develop partnerships with college admissions offices so that we will be able to recommend students to them who will be able to thrive at those schools.

The work we do with our students does not end when they graduate. We continue to assist them throughout college. One of our faculty teaches half-time and also acts as alumni coordinator. We continue to be resources for our students post-graduation, helping them with everything from registering for their college classes, to re-applying for aid, to navigating the challenges of campus life.

### WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

Boys' Latin is a school where the faculty and staff are 100% dedicated to our students' success. This isn't a job that we do for eight hours a day; it is a mission to which we fully commit ourselves. The young men we work with are like family to us, so we work very hard to ensure the best possible futures for them.

We do not let any of our boys get by us. Some of them may be intimidated, or maybe don't understand the process; while some of our boys initially act like they are completely uninterested in college. Whatever the challenges are, we engage them all. Every boy in Boys' Latin has to go through the process. The college persistence rate for Black boys in Philadelphia is 17%. Overall, it's 74% for graduates of Boys' Latin.

# OBSTACLES TO EARLY INTERVENTION & SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

## For African American Children and Families

**KIMBERLY RAILEY, M.ED.**  
The Mariah Group Unlimited

Early childhood programs have become a necessity for millions of Americans. The quest for affordable, dependable and quality child care is a daunting task for any parent, but particularly daunting for parent(s) of a child with disabilities. As the early childhood community opens its doors to include children with disabilities and special health care needs, there exists a growing need to ensure that African American children, particularly those who have experienced adverse life events and those with varying ability levels, are screened for diagnostic indicators as early as possible so that they can receive the services necessary for full participation in community programs, including Head Start, designed to help them reach their full potential.

If a child is determined through evaluation (25% delay using screening tools) to meet the eligibility criteria in one or more areas of development, a specialized team must then determine whether the child qualifies for services within federally recognized categories of disabilities, at which point he or she is referred for Early Intervention and Special Education Services. Federal and state law (*The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act IDEA, 1975*) require that Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) is provided in the least restrictive environment to all children, age three to school age, with disabilities or developmental delays that need “specialized instruction.” These services are generally provided through contracted Intermediate Units (agencies) available in every state and territory of the United States.

## CHANCES OF DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS WHEN CHILDREN EXPERIENCE 6-7 RISK FACTORS

CHANCES OF DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS BY AGE THREE	NUMBER OF RISK FACTORS
0%	1-2
20%	3
40%	4
70%	5
90%	6
100%	7
<b>Risk Factor Categories:</b> Poverty, Caregiver mental illness, Single parent, Low caregiver education, Minority status, Teenage caregiver, Domestic violence, 4 or more children in home, Caregiver substance abuse and Biomedical risk conditions	

Source: Barth R.P. Scarbrough, A., Lloyd, E.C., Losby, J., Casanueva, C. & Mann, T (2008). *Developmental Status & Early Intervention Service Needs of Maltreated Children*, Washington, DC U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Office of Assistant for Planning & Evaluation.

Early Intervention and Special Education Services are the vehicles used to address diagnostic indicators, and constitute a system of supports specific to babies, toddlers and preschool children with developmental delays or disabilities. Program eligibility and referrals generally involve children who are diagnosed at birth with a specific condition or who experience significant prematurity, very low birth weight, illness, or surgery soon after being born. Alternately, children can be referred to the system upon exhibiting diagnostic indicators. Supports are designed to help children learn both basic and brand-new skills that typically develop during the first three years of life. Intervening therapeutic and educational services can greatly contribute to the reduction of necessary special education services in the future. The challenge for African American children is that their parents underutilize these services and the children are not properly evaluated. Therefore, the children do not receive referrals or they receive referrals, but they never connect with services to receive a formal evaluation and targeted support.





The Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) is responsible for providing all licensed, early childhood programs within Philadelphia with a developmental screening tool known as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ). The core of ASQ is a series of 20 questionnaires that correspond to age intervals from birth to 6 years. Each questionnaire contains simple questions for parents to answer about activities their child is able or unable to do. The answers help to determine whether the child's development is on schedule, or whether the child should be referred for a developmental checkup with a professional. The question remains: how many early care and education providers in African American communities are administering the ASQ and/or making parents aware of their right to access it, and how many parents whose children receive the ASQ are connecting with Early Intervention and Special Education Services to receive the supports their child needs?

Public Citizens for Children and Youth recently found that Early Intervention and Special Education programs lose 35% of children and families who are referred because they did not come in for evaluation. Moreover, only 16% of Philadelphia's children are enrolled in high quality early childhood programs that utilize research-based best practices to promote quality early learning environments and positive child outcomes. Such high quality environments rely on the ASQ and other tools to identify diagnostic indicators as early as possible, and support a parent in making the connection to Early Intervention and Special Education Services upon receiving a referral.



**Intervening therapeutic and educational services can greatly contribute to the reduction of necessary special education services in the future.**

Until the major obstacles to receiving services are acknowledged and addressed through parent advocacy, including the challenge of finding access to high quality child care, the African American community will continue to underutilize appropriate, consistent, quality services for young children in need of Early Intervention and Special Education Services. This inadequacy, of course, contributes to putting them significantly behind their non-Black peers in achieving developmental milestones during the critical period from birth to age eight, and drives negative educational outcomes, including failure to be Kindergarten ready or attain third-grade reading goals.

Parents and caregivers need to understand the Early Intervention and Special Education System, their right to access it, the laws governing services and how to work within the system to obtain the services their child(ren)'s diagnostic indicators require. We must be aware, however, of risk factors that consistently present barriers to access for African American children and families and contribute to their significantly lower rates of developmental screening and utilization of Early Intervention and Special Education Services:

- (a) Children who are never screened because they are not in a high quality child care setting,
- (b) Children who are screened, but never referred to a program when a problem is identified,
- (c) Parents' inability to recognize developmental milestones in children,
- (d) Parents' lack of knowledge about benefits and services available to them and their children,
- (e) Parents' substance dependency or mental health issues,
- (f) Health care systems that fail to provide information during well-child visits.

Addressing the obstacles to obtaining Early Intervention and Special Education Services is of increasing concern throughout African American communities. Early care and education professionals and advocates must immediately begin work to mitigate the major challenges driving underutilization of services in our community:

## AMONG BLACK CHILDREN PRE-K THROUGH 12TH GRADE,

**17%** RECEIVED SPECIAL  
EDUCATION SERVICES

**DURING THE 2012-2013 ACADEMIC YEAR.**

- (a) Substandard insurance such as Community Behavioral Health (CBH)/Medical Assistance, which significantly limits the choice of both high quality health care professionals and consistent access to specialized services. In comparison, "Magellan," a private insurance subject to higher co-pays, is not considered "substandard insurance" and does not always include specific support services, such as a Therapeutic Service Specialist (TSS), who provides one-on-one instruction.
- (b) Lack of service coordination across agencies providing interventions and specialized care.
- (c) The parent's lack of knowledge about their rights and those of their children, including procedural safeguards to address compliance issues, the ability to request mediation, requirement for due process, and official channels for resolution of disputes, including advocacy.
- (d) Excessive waiting lists for services if families are not enrolled in community-based programs, such as Head Start or Pre-K Counts, which have mandated services in place.
- (e) Lack of communication from referring agencies on cultural and language needs of families.



- (f) Inadequate transition practices to assist parents transferring children with disabilities into and out of appropriate programs.
- (g) Lack of high quality, ongoing, certified training of early childhood personnel, which is necessary to build parents' confidence, skills and knowledge in accessing and fully documenting communication about resources to meet their child's needs.

As professionals, it remains our responsibility to encourage parents and concerned family members to advocate that their child receive adequate, timely developmental assessment as well as successful connection to necessary support services from birth. It is also our responsibility to advocate for resources that would bring more high quality early care and education centers with mandated Early Intervention and Special Education Services to African American communities. As we work with families to overcome barriers to access, we must first acknowledge their desire to do what is best for their child, and arm them with the information and resources critical to success in their role as first teacher and advocate.

**As we work with families to overcome barriers to access, we must first acknowledge their desire to do what is best for their child, and arm them with the information and resources critical to success in their role as first teacher and advocate.**

# ENSURING PENNSYLVANIA'S CHILDREN THRIVE:

## How Investing In Smart Public Policy Pays Off For Children And Families

### JOAN BENSO

President and CEO  
Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

The circumstances that impact the well-being of Pennsylvania's 2.8 million children can be as diverse as the children themselves. However, most would agree that there are some common foundations children need to be successful and thrive: solid learning opportunities, quality health care and a safe, caring environment in which to grow and learn.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children focuses our public policy work in these core areas, and we've made marked progress in advancing the well-being of children since our founding in 1992. But we know there is much left to do to ensure all Pennsylvania children have the resources they need and deserve to become successful adults.

Poverty, in particular, is an obstacle too many children, especially children of color, face. More than half a million children are living in poverty in Pennsylvania—almost 1 in 5. And while Black children make up about 14 percent of Pennsylvania's child population, 46 percent of the children in Pennsylvania's high-poverty communities are Black.<sup>1</sup> This means the plague of poverty - and the challenges and lost opportunities that poverty creates - impact Black children disproportionately hard.

The good news is that when we invest in the right strategies and policies, we make a difference that can help kids overcome dire circumstances. Here's a look at where Pennsylvania has been—and where we need to go—to improve the lives of our children in the core areas of well-being:

## ABOUT 1 IN 6 OF PENNSYLVANIA'S 3- AND 4-YEAR-OLDS HAVE ACCESS TO A HIGH QUALITY, PUBLICLY FUNDED PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM.

### EARLY LEARNING

Most brain development has occurred by the time a child reaches kindergarten. Unfortunately, not every child benefits from the stimulating environments and nurturing interactions that help develop young minds to their fullest potential. Consider:

- About 1 in 6 of Pennsylvania's 3- and 4-year-olds has access to a high quality, publicly funded pre-kindergarten program.<sup>2</sup>
- Among Pennsylvania children, ages zero to 4, who are in need of child care, only 7.5 percent - or less than 1 in 13 - benefit from high quality care.<sup>3</sup>
- About 319,000 Pennsylvania children under age 5 - nearly half of this young population - live in low-income households, where risk of educational failure is higher.<sup>4</sup>

To improve these statistics, we've been working to increase investments in high quality early learning to provide access for more children, with an emphasis on reaching low-income children. The payoff is proven: Study after study shows that high quality early education provides dramatic and long-lasting benefits in school and beyond.<sup>5</sup> These early years provide a platform that can either propel a child toward a lifetime of accomplishments, or a future of challenges.

### K-12 EDUCATION

Pennsylvania is one of just three states that does not have a predictable funding formula for basic education. This means funding to our 500 school districts changes every fiscal year based on the negotiations of state officials. Without a predictable, reliable formula, schools can't plan for long-term student needs, and students in the district—wealthy and poor, urban, suburban and rural—pay a price for that uncertainty.



**Every documented child has some options for affordable health care, whether it be private insurance, Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).**



The lack of a funding formula is one reason Pennsylvania has the widest funding gap between wealthy and poor school districts of any state in the country. Per-pupil spending in our poorest districts is 33 percent less than in our wealthiest districts.<sup>6</sup> The lack of a formula also perpetuates economic and racial disparities in school funding that contribute to existing achievement gaps.

A Pennsylvania commission recently proposed a school funding formula that drives K-12 investments to districts based on several critical student factors, including the number of students in poverty. We are working as part of a statewide coalition, the Campaign for Fair Education Funding, to have this formula enacted so every student has access to a quality education no matter where they live.

### HEALTH CARE

Children have unique health care needs because of their ongoing development. As they grow and change, children require an array of services to meet their physical and behavioral health care needs.

Fortunately for Pennsylvania's children, we have "universal coverage" for kids. This means that every documented child has some options for affordable health care, whether it be private insurance, Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Yet, despite this universal coverage, we still have about 139,100 uninsured children in the commonwealth—or about 1 in 20 kids.<sup>7</sup>

Pennsylvania has implemented Medicaid expansion, which can help reach some of those uninsured children. While Medicaid expansion only directly impacts low-income adults, rather than kids, children living in low-income families are more likely to be insured if their parents have insurance. That means expanding Medicaid to more adults can help cover more kids.

### CHILD WELFARE

Good schools and good health mean little if a child is in an unsafe or uncaring environment. That's why our public policy work also focuses on the child welfare system with the goal of ensuring every child has a safe, nurturing environment amidst a loving family.

## AMONG PENNSYLVANIA CHILDREN, AGES ZERO TO 4, WHO ARE IN NEED OF CHILD CARE, ONLY 7.5 PERCENT—OR LESS THAN 1 IN 13—BENEFIT FROM HIGH QUALITY CARE.

Over the last two years, we worked with state policymakers to enact more than 20 new laws to better protect children from abuse and neglect. Pennsylvania is seeing an increase in the number of reports of suspected child abuse, likely due to both increased awareness and these improved child protection efforts.

To adequately address the needs of children who are victims of abuse and neglect, we're working to make sure Pennsylvania puts adequate resources into its county-based child welfare system now and in the years ahead. Rooting out child abuse is a noble effort, but it will amount to little good if we can't provide for the needs of children who've been removed from unsafe homes.

### A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR OUR CHILDREN

Taken as a whole, the targeted public policy work and strategies we use at Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children are helping to make Pennsylvania a better place to live, learn and thrive for our children, including 385,000 Black children<sup>8</sup> who call Pennsylvania home. We need more partners and advocates in communities across the state to join us in contacting elected officials, lobbying at the Capitol and raising our collective voice to draw attention to the needs of Black children. It is our shared responsibility to ensure that Pennsylvania citizens, elected officials and agencies across the education, health and social sectors work collaboratively to meet their needs and provide equitable systems of care and support from birth. Together, we will work toward a future in which being born Black is not a risk factor.



### **Point of Proof:**

## **BENJAMIN B. COMEGYS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

### **WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT “A POINT OF PROOF?”**

When Lisa Wilmer became Principal of Benjamin B. Comegys Elementary School in 2010, she already had 10 years of experience working in the school as both a teacher and assistant principal. Having accepted the role of principal because of her belief that all of its students could succeed, she forged ahead with the goal to positively improve outcomes for students and families in the Southwest Philadelphia area. With the challenges of strict mandates, a lack of resources and a district in the midst of a financial depression this would prove difficult.

To make the necessary impacts, she decided to devote attention to finding academic intervention/enrichment and extracurricular opportunities through partnership development. Principal Wilmer believed that developing strong partnerships with external entities would provide students with access to resources that would ensure the comprehensive educational experience that all students deserve.

### **WHAT IS THIS PROJECT’S ELEVATOR SPEECH?**

The vision of Benjamin B. Comegys Elementary School is to create a safe and nurturing learning environment in which students achieve academic excellence. Strong partnerships with community entities provide students with access to resources that ensure they have the comprehensive educational experience all students deserve.

### **WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?**

During the partnership project’s first year, the school had one existing partnership: an after-school program that was operated by University of Pennsylvania, the Ivy League School located just blocks away from the school. Principal Wilmer and her

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**DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR 2014-2015, COMEGYS’  
STUDENTS SAW GAINS IN READING FROM**

**30% TO 42.9%**

**IN KINDERGARTEN AND GAINS**

**30.2% TO 42.9%**

**IN FIRST GRADE.**

team worked closely and collaboratively with this partnership, and subsequently secured two more partnerships the following year; one with the Philadelphia Eagles Youth Partnership, a nonprofit part of the NFL team, who installed a new playground and painted murals in and around the entire school. The other was with Save a Mind, a foundation working to eliminate disparities in education. The foundation provided a monetary incentive for all students in grades 5 and 6 who exhibited effort and positive behavior throughout the school year.

Now in the fifth year of project implementation, Comegys Elementary School has close to ten partnerships; all focused on the common goal “to create access and opportunities for all students to positively impact student’s outcomes.”

All partnerships that work with the school serve students ranging in grades from Kindergarten to Eighth. A requirement of each partnership program is that they must be implemented at **no cost** to the school, students or parent/guardians. Current community and academic partnerships working within the school include:

- University of Pennsylvania- Netter Center
- Children’s Literacy Initiative
- Devereux (PBIS)
- Save a Mind Foundation





- Eagles Youth Partnership
- Big Brothers/Big Sisters
- City Step
- Local Police Station
- Two Local Churches

*(Note: Permission is required by the School District to begin any partnership.)*

### HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

Comegys defines success using multiple data sources, including but not limited to student summative data, teacher performance reports, and parent and stakeholder surveys to determine short and long-term school goals have been met. The school outlines three key aims:

#### 1. Improve academic achievement

During the school year 2014-2015, the school received a two-year literacy grant managed by Children's Literacy Initiative (CLI). In turn, teachers in K-3 received on-site coaching and professional development in early literacy Monday through Friday in areas such as word study, creating and managing the literacy environment and effective practices in comprehension. As a result of this partnership, Comegys' students saw gains in reading from 30% to 42.9% in kindergarten and gains 30.2% to 42.9% in first grade. In August, 2015, 90% of K-3 teachers, volunteered to participate in a week long full day intensive literacy workshop offered by CLI. The partnership with CLI coupled with strong teacher buy-in will continue to improve overall reading levels in primary grades and consequently ensure that all students are reading on level by fourth grade.

#### 2. Create a safe and positive school climate

The school set a goal to reduce out-of-school suspensions (OSS) by implementing a positive behavior approach. As a result of this program, OSS year to date data went from 104 in 2013-2014 to 74 in 2014-2015. By year's end, only 26 students had more than two suspensions during the entire school year. To ensure the school continued with this positive climate it applied for and received a 5-year partnership with Devereux, a leading national behavioral healthcare provider, to implement a more comprehensive and data driven school-wide positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS).



### 3. Provide families with access to resources

In school year 2014-2015 over 10% of parents returned parent surveys and gave favorable comments regarding school satisfaction. This largely is a result of consistent parent/stakeholder meetings to discuss school issues and share school resources and information. Additionally, the parent resource center continues to grow and families visit daily.

These goals are all discussed extensively during partnership reviews, which typically occur at least two times during a school year. The leadership team has learned that ongoing monitoring and transparency of success or failure is crucial for continued success.

### HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THE PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

We know our partnership program is a success because partnerships continue to grow and expand. For example, the after-school program now has a waiting list to participate. Additionally, each year the school has increased activities with our community school partnerships. During the first year, the Netter Center partnership with the University of Pennsylvania, serviced between 50-70 students and only offered free after-school service and homework help. In subsequent years, after-school programs to align with school day goals have been added. Today, the school offers over ten after-school activities that range from building literacy proficiency to enhancing math and science skills and service over 100 students.

Although overall state data does not yet reflect these academic strides, the school sees improvement in its early grades reading success and in students' daily homework completion, positive behavior and overall attitude toward their school. Based on September 2015 and October 2015 data, daily student attendance has soared to at least 93% daily; a major shift in positive trajectory for the school that academicians agree will have lasting impacts on its students' success as the highest performers in school also attend school with the most regularity.

The impact of the school's longest running partnership with the University of Pennsylvania has been a driver of increased during and after-school program attendance. Comegys school day activities include Academically Based Community Service partnerships that provide pedagogical classroom support and one-on-one tutoring.

The Structured Recess Program was developed in partnership with the school, the University and the West Philadelphia Recess Initiative. It provides a structured and organized daily recess experience for Comegys Elementary School students and staff. Students are encouraged to take leadership roles by coordinating various recess activities for their peers. Enrichment opportunities such as teambuilding activities, community clean-up, and environmental education (taught through the



upkeep of the school garden) are offered alongside traditional recess activities in order to provide students with activity alternatives recess, especially for students who have difficulty functioning during normal recess activities.

The After School Enrichment Program at the school offers daily homework assistance, incorporates project-based learning, organizes field trips, invites guest speakers/traveling shows and coordinates character development activities. Students from the university also mentor students through the Community School Student Partnerships (CSSP); support after school activities; and through the Penn Reading Initiative, tutor students using the Reading Road curriculum developed by the Penn Linguistics Laboratory. A new partnership began in fall 2012 with the Penn Men's Lacrosse Team, through which its players coach and train Comegys students in the game of lacrosse, as well as provide academic tutoring and mentoring.

### WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

We continue to work collaboratively to make a positive impact on students and that positive energy is spreading beyond our school walls. In fact, students have started to make inspirational music videos that spread positives messages that have gone beyond our school. In 2015, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan tweeted, "Awesome lyrics and hook by kids of Comegys School in Philly reminding us all to be #BuddiesNotBullies!" about our Anti-Bullying videos. To that end, the school's programs are largely successful because of the resources it offers with on-site access to free resources, which would typically cost parents and families hundreds of dollars.

According to Priscilla Little, the former associate director of the Harvard Family Research Project, in her article, "School-Community Learning Partnerships: Essential to Expanded Learning Success," in addition to supporting student learning directly, partnerships can have additional benefits to students and their families by:

- providing continuity of services across the day and year, easing school transitions and promoting improved attendance in after school programs
- facilitating access to a range of learning opportunities and developmental supports, providing opportunities for students and teachers alike to experiment with new approaches to teaching and learning
- facilitating information sharing about specific students to best support individual learning and
- providing family members with alternative entry points into the school day to support their student's learning.

### WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

Ensuring that there is consistent funding is always a challenge faced in school/community partnerships. If the funding source runs out sometimes programs have to stop; negatively impacting parents and students. Therefore, the school is always looking forward to partnerships to ensure that there are always multiple opportunities for students. Consistency is key. The school typically asks for a commitment of two years for any of its programs to ensure stability for students.

### HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

Most programs are only sustainable with commitments from partners. For example, after-school programs are reviewed in areas such as enrollment, program development and customer satisfaction to determine if state funding will still be offered. This model has proved sustainable for over five years to date.

### HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

To develop any new partnership, leaders must be willing to reach out to local universities, businesses and other organizations to share the vision for their school; be clear and specific about the type of support you need; and be willing to collaborate to get the desired results. If that is done well, networking efforts will pay dividends and lead to partnerships.

### WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

People should know that partnership development takes time. Today, all of Comegys' students are able to benefit from the partnerships established in the school, but it was through hard work and dedication of time. It was not easy to establish these relationships, but once they are solidified, the reward is tremendous. Now, we all work together to provide all students with access to a comprehensive educational experience that they all deserve.

Additionally, being flexible is vital for partnership success. Every stakeholder must understand that all have to be willing to give a little to get more in return. For example, with the school's University of Pennsylvania partnership, school staff give up their classrooms after-school and also allow research teams to gather data based on student performance. However, as a result students and families receive: free after-school care, free homework help, mentoring, school-day tutoring, and participation in after-school sports including basketball and lacrosse, and clubs such as cooking, gardening, drama and dance. These minor compromises are far outweighed by the benefits and resources that the school and students receive.



# ACHIEVING HEALTHY WEIGHT AND FREEDOM FROM OBESITY-RELATED HEALTH PROBLEMS IN BLACK CHILDREN:

## A Call To Action

### SHIRIKI KUMANYIKA, PHD, MPH

Founder and Chair, African American Collaborative Obesity Research Network  
Research Professor in Community Health and Prevention, Drexel University School of Public Health  
Professor Emerita of Epidemiology, University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine

The issues of being overweight and obesity have entered the discourse about child health and development in a major way both in the United States and globally.<sup>1</sup> The first phase of this dialogue focused on documenting the scope and importance of the problem. The conversation has now turned to accelerating solutions.<sup>2,3</sup> The adverse effects of carrying excess body weight occur throughout the course of one's life, but are of the greatest concern for children. Excess weight, indicative of excess body fat, compromises many aspects of physical, mental and social health during childhood, and foretells a future of weight-related physical, social, emotional, and economic burdens in adulthood. Also, children with obesity may have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.<sup>4</sup>

The time is right for Black communities to make this a high priority issue. Global, national, state and local leaders now recognize that a focus on individual counseling cannot solve widespread increases in obesity, especially among children. Whole society and whole community approaches are needed to transform the current, obesity-promoting environments in ways that re-establish sensible norms about eating and physical activity.<sup>5,6,7</sup> There is now sufficient

**Eating and physical activity are interwoven into our day-to-day socio-cultural, family and economic processes. Therefore, solutions to obesity in Black children must gather community resources and strengths and must align with other child and community health initiatives.**

experience to know what types of policies, programs and social change initiatives are needed in general.<sup>8</sup> However, sustainable solutions must fit within the bigger picture of perceptions, needs and resources in specific communities. Black communities are no exception. In fact, because Black communities are disproportionately affected by obesity, they have more to gain from well-crafted obesity solutions.

### ONE IN FOUR BLACK CHILDREN ARE OVERWEIGHT OR OBESE

Substantial proportions of Black boys and girls have weight levels in the overweight or obese range; more than half of these children are obese. The public health target is that less than 14.5% of 2 to 19 year olds will have weights in the obese range (95th percentile cutoff). (In Black children, 24% have weights in the obese range, and nearly 1 in 5 have weights in the very obese range (97th percentile cutoff) (Table 1).<sup>9,10</sup> (Twice as many Black girls than white girls have weights at or above the 95th percentile cutoff.)







**TABLE 1. PERCENT OF CHILDREN AGES 2 TO 19 YEARS WITH OVERWEIGHT OR OBESITY:**  
**US National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2009-2010**

	OVERWEIGHT OR OBESE <sup>a</sup>	OBESE	
	Growth chart cutoff		
	>85th Percentile	>95th Percentile <sup>b</sup>	>97th Percentile <sup>c</sup>
Black Boys	36.9	24.3	19.4
White Boys	30.1	16.1	11.6
Black Girls	41.3	24.3	17.8
White Girls	25.6	11.7	7.8

<sup>a</sup> percent with body mass index in the overweight or obese range

<sup>b</sup> percent of children anywhere in the obese range

<sup>c</sup> The 97th percentile indicates the most severe level of obesity

Data source: Ogden et al, JAMA 2012; 307(5):483-490

Obesity increases risks for several adverse health outcomes during childhood—metabolic syndrome, hypertension, blood lipid disorders, and Type 2 diabetes; orthopedic problems; depression, liver disease, asthma and obstructive sleep apnea are among them.<sup>11</sup> The occurrence of Type 2 diabetes in children, although still infrequent, has dramatized the seriousness of obesity as a child health concern. In 2008-2009, the rate of new cases of diabetes in Black youth, ages 10-19 years old, was ~45/100,000 per year (with more than 50% classified as Type 2 diabetes) versus ~31 cases in whites with only about 5 percent classified as Type 2.<sup>12</sup>

### **BLACK CHILDREN ARE AT THE HEART OF A 'PERFECT STORM' OF OBESITY DRIVERS**

To understand why Black children are affected disproportionately requires an understanding of the factors driving the progressive increases in average weight levels of populations in general. These increases, occurring over a relatively short time period, point to societal influences that are outside of the control of the average individual.<sup>13</sup> Individual instincts toward food and exercise have not changed, but there have been marked changes in opportunities and inducements for overeating and inactivity in our living, work, and educational environments.

Communities have become more urbanized and more mechanized, resulting in a marked drop in calories burned in daily routines and recreational activities. It is common for both children and adults to sit for many hours at home, school or work with insufficient physical activity. At the same time, the availability and appeal of high-calorie, nutrition-poor foods and beverages has increased.<sup>14,15,16</sup> High calorie foods and beverages that are convenient, inexpensive and taste good are heavily



marketed. Moreover, marketers use strategies designed to elicit emotional reactions to food, and use large portion sizes to create a sense that people are getting more value for their money.<sup>17</sup> People generally eat more when presented with more food, even if they do not consume the entire portion; they underestimate how much they are eating. Round-the-clock television, the internet and other digital devices provide channels for ubiquitous food advertising and also predispose people to sedentary behavior.<sup>18</sup>

Children have limited autonomy and resources with which to resist these influences. Their daytime physical activity and food options are determined by school and child care policies. Out-of-school time options are determined by food and physical activity related policies at after-school or summer programs. Neighborhood options for free play are determined by neighborhood safety and infrastructure and availability of adult supervision. Food access at home is a function of what parents and other caregivers decide to buy which, in turn, is influenced by the food marketing environment. All of these options are controlled by adults.

Advertising of high calorie food and beverage products dominates children's food information environments, and affects their food preferences.<sup>19</sup> Although some progress has been made in this sphere, pervasive marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages directly to children continues, especially to teens, and children also see the messages directed to adults.<sup>20</sup> Messages designed for children may play upon developmental processes such as identity formation and adventure seeking, and use the children's social networks to increase uptake and dissemination.<sup>21</sup>

None of these obesity-promoting influences is specific to or intrinsic to Black children, but these forces are more concentrated in U.S. Black communities. These trends align with patterns of racial/ethnic stratification. An extensive body of research documents the interconnected problems of: a) difficulty in accessing healthy food and greater access to fast food in Black communities; b) the greater intensity of unhealthy food and beverage marketing that specifically targets Black children and communities through advertising and promotions in Black-oriented media, links to Black organizations, and neighborhood-level promotions; and c) limited access to safe and appealing opportunities for outdoor or supervised indoor recreational facilities that facilitate physical activity.<sup>22,23,24,25,26,27,28,29</sup> Some of these factors are problematic mainly in low income Black communities, whereas others affect Black Americans regardless of family income.

## IMPLICATIONS

Eating and physical activity are interwoven into our day-to-day socio-cultural, family, and economic processes. Therefore, solutions to obesity in Black children must gather community resources and strengths and must align with other child and community health initiatives.<sup>30,31</sup> This also means that solutions to other community problems should be sensitive to potential effects on nutrition, physical activity, and body weight.

The conversation about community-level change related to food and physical activity may be complicated. When it comes to patterns of eating and physical activity, adults need to be role models and must be integrally involved in making positive changes toward child obesity. Some may see the down side to changing the status quo, e.g., with respect to taking money from companies that sell harmful products.<sup>32</sup> Others may be discouraged by what seem to be insurmountable obstacles. For example, Black shoppers express frustration with the effort it takes to obtain the types of foods that are recommended for a healthy diet, and with the higher prices for healthier foods.<sup>33,34,35</sup> Black men and women express interest in being more physically active but also describe various deterrents to physical activity often prevail.<sup>36</sup> Addressing these obstacles will require concerted community action.

Even child health advocates may be uncertain about the importance of taking actions to address obesity at the community level. In a survey of attendees at the National Black Child Development Institute National Health Forum in 2009, most respondents were aware and concerned that food marketing encourages children's consumption of high calorie foods, and that TV watching and neighborhood conditions influence their physical activity. However, 78% also agreed that "more than anyone, parents are primarily responsible for what their children eat" and 93% agreed that parents have the responsibility to make sure their child learns to like a variety of foods." These beliefs are compatible with taking community-level action if parental responsibility is viewed as extending to assure environmental contexts that support children's healthy eating and activity behaviors. However, a belief that parents have the primary responsibility to prevent child obesity will be counterproductive if it leads to an overreliance on parent education approaches as the sole action strategy. Community action to change the mix of options is necessary for effective educational approaches.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations focus on physical, socio-cultural, and information environments that influence children's eating, physical activity, and weight control. They build on current trends in evidence-based child obesity prevention; initiatives and resources available in Black communities; and the work of the African American Collaborative Obesity Research Network (AACORN)—a Pennsylvania-based, national affinity group of researchers and community-based partners committed to the increase in physical activity and prevention of weight gain within the contexts of social and family interactions in African American communities.

The key goals of the recommendations are: a) increase the availability, affordability, and promotion of fruits and vegetables and water, and de-emphasize packaged snack foods, high-calorie restaurant and takeout foods, and sugary drinks; and b) increase the availability, affordability and appeal of opportunities for physical activity in daily routines and recreation and de-emphasize sedentariness.<sup>37,38</sup> Highlights include:

- **Facilitate maximum adoption and implementation of federal guidelines for healthful eating and physical activity patterns in educational and child care settings in Black communities.** Key food-related levers include the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the National School Lunch Program and the comparable programs that provide food in early child care settings.<sup>39,40,41,42</sup> There is still much work to be done to ensure maximum implementation of these programs in settings that reach Black children. In addition, a renewed effort to restore options for school-based physical education and physical activity is underway and focused efforts can reach Black communities, with the expectation of co-benefits for preventing obesity and improving other aspects of children's academic experiences.<sup>43</sup>

**Black communities have the power to find solutions to child obesity. Raising awareness about child obesity and the "perfect storm" of obesity risks for children in Black communities will eventually move us to action.**



- **Engage with diverse organizations and food gatekeepers to advance transformative conversations about ways to improve the mix of foods available to and consumed by Black children at home and in community settings.** The centrality of food and eating to social processes in Black communities provides a starting point for such a conversation.<sup>44,45,46</sup> The accounts of current efforts of Black and other communities to assess and change what is available in their food environments can help focus the conversation on solutions.<sup>47,48</sup> For example, initiatives to help small neighborhood stores promote and sell healthier products to children have shown results worthy of replication.<sup>49,50</sup> Benchmarking tools can help raise community awareness and commitment to improving food environments and support data-based advocacy for policy change.<sup>51</sup>
- **Undertake special initiatives for obesity prevention in Black boys and their adult role models.** High priority should be given to explore ways to ensure adequate attention to prevent obesity-related chronic diseases in Black males from childhood onward. Many obesity-related studies and initiatives have focused on females, motivated by the higher prevalence of obesity in girls and women. However, obesity prevalence has been rising in Black boys and men,<sup>52,53</sup> and obesity prevalence is now similar in Black boys and girls (See Table 1). Black communities are engaged in a “Black Lives Matter” movement that speaks to our ability to mobilize for action and demand positive change, particularly in relation to Black boys and men. Links between large body size, body image in Black boys and men, and the way Black boys and men are viewed in society are worth exploring.
- **Work with community organizations to leverage “consumer power” to increase the marketing of healthy foods and beverages to Black youth.** Given the major influence of food marketing in determining what is available and how it is promoted to drive consumers to certain products, and given the fact that Black children and their caregivers are targeted disproportionately with marketing for unhealthy foods, any successes in this arena can have a greater than average positive impact on in Black communities. Some success has been made with efforts to increase the marketing of healthy foods. However, there is still a long way to go,<sup>54</sup> and a need to ensure that successes are not limited to predominantly white or high-income communities. Although marketers target Black youth—who are generally trend setters and heavily engaged with Social Media—to their advantage, this strategy can also be leveraged to promote a healthier mix of products in Black communities.

- **Partner with faith communities.** The evidenced-based research on the involvement of Black churches in obesity prevention suggests pathways for identifying and implementing sustainable solutions that reach Black children and families.<sup>55</sup> Although there is limited research on this topic with other Black faith communities, the same principle applies, i.e., embedding obesity-preventing policies and programs in faith organizations that have strong bonds and long-term relationships with children and families.
- **Take advantage of existing, exemplary efforts to engage Black families and children around a physical activity-oriented health movement.** Visionary initiatives like Girl Trek and Black Girls Run are two well-developed initiatives of this health movement.<sup>56</sup>
- **Include obesity-prevention in broader efforts to improve growth, development, and quality of life for Black children.** The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a major foundation funder in the childhood obesity arena, is giving high priority to cross-sector community efforts to address social and economic inequities related to obesity nationwide.<sup>57</sup> This funding initiative reflects the increasing recognition from health leaders that initiatives in one area may require and can benefit from community improvement efforts in other areas. For example, diverse approaches to increasing healthy food access in underserved neighborhoods are effective for economic development and job creation.<sup>58</sup> Initiatives to improve the quality of parks and recreational facilities, street lighting, green space and housing improve community safety, quality of life and also encourages physical activity.<sup>59</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The power to solve most problems rests in communities’ proven ability to mobilize for change once awareness is raised.<sup>60</sup> Black communities have the power to find solutions to child obesity. Raising awareness about child obesity and the “perfect storm” of obesity risks for children in Black communities will eventually move us to action. From a collective health and well-being perspective, there are many reasons to advocate for social change to fight obesity and obesity risk factors. U.S. Black history offers clear precedents for a willingness to leave our comfort zones in the short term to fight for survival and viability in the long term. The time has come to do this again.







**Point of Proof:**

# MIGHTY WRITERS

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

## WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”

Our mission is to teach kids to think and write with clarity. To do this, we create safe storefront spaces where kids feel supported and encouraged to explore the world through words, to make sense of their surroundings through words and to work toward a better world - through words.

We operate in four Philadelphia locations:

- South Philly, at 1501 Christian Street
- West Philly/Mantua, at 3861 Lancaster Avenue
- South 9th Street Market (“El Futuro”), at 1025 South 9th Street
- North Philly, at 1801 Diamond Street

Our model is to build welcoming and fun youth writing centers in challenged neighborhoods, with a robust roster of year-round programs that includes:

- An afterschool **Mighty Academy**, in which elementary and middle school kids complete writing projects and homework from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday. From September to June, 30 Philadelphia students in third through eighth grades come together in each location to complete homework and short- and long-term writing projects. Volunteer teaching assistants and tutors provide small group assistance, often working one-to-one with struggling students. Daily activities include: community-building activities; literacy games; writing instruction in the genres of informative, persuasive, narrative and poetry; and homework help. We will serve at least 120 kids in the Mighty Academy after school program in 2016.

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**89%** OF STUDENTS WHO ATTENDED  
THE MIGHTY WRITERS  
AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM

AT LEAST 3 TIMES PER WEEK WERE PROFICIENT IN WRITING BY  
THE END OF THE YEAR.

- **Themed writing workshops** for elementary, middle, and high school students. Led by volunteers, workshops inspire creativity and career motivation by covering a wide range of topics and genres that attract kids who are not part of our ongoing programs. Workshops range from one session to eight over as many weeks. Because of the number of workshop opportunities, they comprise the largest number of participants. In 2016, we will present at least 150 workshops, serving at least 1,500 participants.
- **Writing Mentorships** pair kids of all the ages we serve (seven to seventeen) with volunteer professional writers in weekly, 90-minute sessions. Mentors and kids work on writing projects, school and career planning, time management, and other issues as they arise. Mentors and mentees select books to read together based on topics relevant to the mentee. We train mentors to report any issues that may need more qualified help, in-house or beyond. In 2016, we will serve at least 85 children and youth in mentorships.
- **A College Readiness Initiative** that includes high school workshops, SAT prep courses (three throughout the year, with each course composed of 24 two-hour evening classes), college admissions essay nights (supported by volunteers), college tours, and a weekly Teen Scholars program. The average post-course score of students in our SAT Prep Course was 1465, compared to an average of 1217 for African American students in Pennsylvania (*College Bound Seniors State Profile Report, The College Board, 2013*).





## WHAT IS THIS PROJECT'S ELEVATOR SPEECH?

Mighty Writers teaches as many Philadelphia kids as possible, ages 7 to 17, to think and write with clarity so they can achieve success at school, at work and in life. Everything we do at Mighty Writers is designed to combat Philadelphia's literacy crisis. 40% of our city's students drop out of high school and half of all working-age adults have basic literacy issues. These are the statistics Mighty Writers seeks to change.

To write with clarity, you must first think clearly. When you think clearly, you are more likely to make smart decisions. And, when you make enough smart decisions, self-esteem soars and success follows. This mantra underscores all we do at Mighty Writers. Every child is special, and every student has infinite potential. We make every young person who comes through our doors feel welcomed, celebrated and "Mighty" by creating a community that is supportive, loving and striving.

## WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?

In the 2014-15 school year, we served nearly 2,000 Philadelphia students, 65% of whom were African American, 11% Hispanic, 8% Asian American, 5% White, and 10% Other. Students come from a range of schools, traditional public, charter, independent, cyber and homeschool, and their families range from working poor to middle class.

At Mighty Writers South, in the heart of an historic African American neighborhood, nearly 85% of students receive free/reduced price lunches. At Mighty Writers West in the Mantua/Powelton neighborhood, 30% of residents live below the poverty line, and the Obama Administration designated the area a federal Promise Zone. Mighty Writers North, housed in the historic Church of the Advocate, is within the boundaries of Philadelphia's 22nd Police District, which has the highest rates of youth crime and violence, and is the primary target of the City's strategic plan to reduce youth crime.

## HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

We measure outcomes throughout the year using a variety of measures: report cards, SAT test results, MyAccess results and an annual survey of students and parents.

In the Mighty Academy, we use MyAccess, an online assessment tool to evaluate writing at the first and final draft stage of six writing projects throughout the school year. MyAccess allows us to assess students' improvement in key elements of writing and to see how their work ranks against their peers, using widely accepted standards of writing process instruction: focus, development, organization, language use, mechanics & conventions. We evaluate the SAT Prep Program based on SAT practice test results at the beginning and end of the program. Finally, at the end of each program year, we interview and survey students, parents and volunteers to hear what we are doing well, and what we need to improve.

## HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

We help kids improve their writing, not just at Mighty Writers, but in school. Students also change their attitudes about writing, and how they see themselves as writers. We know this from collecting report cards, regular online assessments and annual surveys. Moreover, students come back to Mighty Writers day after day and year after year, excited about writing, improving their writing in measurable ways, and entering (and winning!) contests and having their work featured in independent publications. We partner with Philadelphia Stories, Jr. Apiary Literary Magazine and other local publications who are interested in lifting up Philly student work.

Students only leave Mighty Writers if they move or change schools. Fortunately, we now have multiple sites in multiple neighborhoods, so we are starting to see students move or change schools and get connected to another MW site.

The following data reflects our success in achieving outcomes for students:

- **MW Academy:** 96% of students who attended the afterschool program at least 3 times/week were proficient in writing for their grade levels (based on MyAccess assessment).
- **MW Academy:** 89% of students who attended the afterschool program at least 3 times/week were proficient in writing by the end of the year, according to their report cards (B or higher).
- **MW Academy:** 45% of students' reading comprehension grades improved during their time in the Academy (the other 55% stayed the same). The majority of the students who stayed the same were already achieving high A's in reading comprehension.





- **Themed Workshops:** 23% of parents saw “a great deal of improvement” in their child’s writing ability, and 58% of parents saw “steady improvement”.
- **Themed Workshops:** 88% of parents were confident that the activities in the workshops improved their child(ren)’s grades in school.
- **Mentorships:** 75% of mentorships who were matched during the 2014-15 school year achieved the goal of meeting once weekly for six months. The majority of these (over 50%) continued to meet after their initial six months.
- **Mentorships:** When mentees and parents were surveyed at the end of the year, none reported significant academic struggles during the year; 50% reported significant behavioral improvement; 100% reported that they went on a field trip together.
- **Mentorships:** One-third of mentors felt “supported as needed”; Two thirds felt “very supported”; none indicated that they were in need of support.
- **College Readiness:** SAT Prep Program students scored an average of 1465 on the SAT, compared to an average of 1217 for African American students in Pennsylvania.
- **College Readiness:** In Philadelphia, only 45% of African American high school freshman graduate in four years. However, 100% of participants in our weekly Teen Scholars program not only graduate in four years, but go on to college, military or vocational school and are persisting.

Mighty Writers’ greatest successes are reflected in students’ accomplishments. There’s Christian, who gained confidence and public speaking skills sufficient to be appointed to The Philadelphia Foundation’s YOUTHadelphia Youth Advisory Committee. And Raven, a quiet high school junior who endured a rigorous, multi-step process and interview to become one of 25 students selected for the Princeton Summer Journalism Program.

#### WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

When you walk into a **Mighty Writers Academy** studio any afternoon, Monday through Thursday, you will see as many as 30 kids enjoying total immersion in reading and writing, and sharing their thoughts with peers.



Our diverse program staff and volunteers work with children and youth in a culturally relevant framework. Our reading materials feature diverse authors and main characters, and deal with issues familiar to students. Writing prompts are genre specific so that students learn the main types of writing, but are open enough that both an African American girl and Vietnamese boy can easily draw on their own experiences.

We incorporate reading via a mentor text model of instruction in all programs. According to Lynn Dorfman, co-director of the Pennsylvania Writing and Literature Project: "Mentor texts are pieces of literature that both teacher and student can return to and reread for many different purposes. They are texts to be studied and imitated...Mentor texts help students to take risks and be different writers tomorrow than they are today. It helps them to try out new strategies and formats. A mentor text doesn't have to be in the form of a book—a mentor text might be a poem, a newspaper article, song lyrics, comic strips, manuals, essays, almost anything."

In all our programs, we employ the "workshop" approach to teaching writing to children, which holds that writing is a process, with distinct phases, and that all children can learn to write well. This approach was designed and studied by Lucy Calkins, founding director of Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. We provide professional development year-round, with follow-up and feedback opportunities as recommended in several papers by the Out of School Time Resource Center and others.

In our **College Readiness** program, Mighty students will have more college options because of their higher ACT scores. Participants are introduced to a course that contains college-level rigor, as well as college-level thinking and writing. Emphasis is placed on the importance of showing up, asking questions, and following through, as means by which success is achieved. Through the application-based acceptance process, students also gain interview skills and experience, as well as familiarity with an admissions process, and the importance of checking and responding to email and phone messages. Moreover, students become more college and career oriented than many of their non-Mighty participating peers, and feel more prepared and confident for their futures. Younger Mighty Writers students look up to the Mighty high-school students and begin to dream of their own college-bound futures.

## WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

Organizational growth has caused most of our challenges. As a result of launching Mighty Writers West in 2013, MW El Futuro in March 2015, and MW North in April 2015, we more than doubled our staff size, from three full-time and one part-time, to seven full-time and four part-time. The organization needed to create human resources systems and office policies to manage staff and facilities in two locations. To help, we recruited Mindy Mazer, HR Executive at AMETEK, to our board of directors, and then worked with her to create our employee handbook and related policies and practices. We worked on articulating our core values and communicating organizational culture to new staff and volunteers. With a grant from the Institute for Black Male Achievement, we began a series of professional development workshops for our program staff.

Because virtually all of our kids live in poverty, we come across a myriad of problems that we are not equipped or trained to resolve. Problems like food insecurity, housing instability, moving from school to school throughout the year, access to quality schools, learning differences and disabilities that may be undiagnosed or unrecognized, and chronic health problems that may be undiagnosed or untreated. To address this need, we have researched partner organizations to which we can refer kids who need help outside our expertise, and we made a directory of those organizations available to our staff. We also employ sensitivity to diversity in everything we do: the books we're reading, the authors that we're revering and the video clips we're watching reflect the diversity and challenges of our students themselves.

## HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

Our staff, board and other volunteers are constantly working to identify new funding sources in three areas: individuals, foundations and corporations. Our current funding makeup is 40% individuals, 50% foundations and 10% corporations. We have an aggressive plan to bring in more funding than last year to sustain our current programs, and to fuel expansion into new neighborhoods. We want to keep making every student who walks through our doors feel Mighty, and we want to take that Mighty feeling to students in other neighborhoods who need us just as badly.

Our Development Committee plans to raise more funds in 2015 through several initiatives, including: more personal solicitations of current and potential major donors, more outreach to corporate funders, and more outreach to foundations. To support this work, we recruited several new members, with experience in marketing and major gifts fundraising, to our Board of Directors.

## HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

Mighty Writers' program is scalable and we are actively working to make that happen. After launching in 2009, we opened a second full-time location in 2013 and two more in 2015. We are now talking with two additional organizations—the Anderson Monarchs and Puentes de Salud—with which we have done some programming in the past, about expanding the model of embedding our programs (Mighty Academy, Themed Workshops, Mentorships & College Readiness) in other organizations. While our goals are the same in each neighborhood—to teach kids to think and write with clarity—the reading material, writing prompts, and ancillary activities vary to be most relevant.

Mighty Writers has developed a model to successfully expand into new communities. We partner with existing neighborhood organizations with similar goals, develop programs appropriate to the neighborhood, and then recruit staff and volunteers that can work effectively with the students and families. In each of our neighborhoods, volunteers from several universities, corporations and the local writing community in and near Philadelphia, have sought out our programs.

## WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

At Mighty Writers, the students we see daily are at the core of everything we do. In a city where the public schools are underfunded, understaffed and underperforming—where only 42% of all public school students read at proficient or advanced levels—Mighty Writers works with students who are struggling to read and write at grade level. We work with students who are great readers and writers, but who are not challenged because teachers are struggling with crowded classrooms and less prepared students. We work with students whose families cannot afford to pay hundreds of dollars for commercial SAT prep courses so their children have the best possible chance of getting into college. We right the wrongs of a system that fails to prepare low income children, and children of color, especially, for success in school, work and life.



## **‘GROW TO GREATNESS’:**

### **Using a Culturally Responsive, Afrocentric Curriculum to Cultivate Leadership Among Students**

#### **LOUIS MASON**

Former Director, Office of Postsecondary Readiness & Career & Technical Education,  
Camden City Public Schools

#### **SHOSHANA TYLER**

Assistant Principal of Instruction, Global Leadership Academy

In 2007, Dr. Naomi Booker founded a K-8 charter school deep in the heart of West Philadelphia, created to make a difference in the way African American students view their roles and responsibilities as leaders in their community and the world. The Global Leadership Academy Charter School has since grown to serve 722 students: 98% are African American, and 84% are economically disadvantaged.

The international and expeditionary components of the school’s academic curriculum have earned Global Leadership Academy (GLA) a reputation for transforming the lives of its scholars. It is now one of the most sought-after public charter schools in the city with annual enrollment waiting lists of more than 1,000 children.

GLA’s curriculum is unique, robust and explicitly designed to foster the self-worth of students of African descent in an international context: Eighth grade scholars graduate school well versed in the social, political and economic systems of 25 different countries, own a passport, and have traveled outside of the country twice. The emphasis on expeditionary learning is a way to ensure that what scholars are learning is relevant to their understanding that history is not something read about in textbooks, but something that we actively create each day. The study of American and world history and social studies is completed through an Afrocentric lens, featuring study of routes enslaved Africans travelled in the Caribbean and North America; evolution of the fight for civil rights from past to the present; and reflection on scholars’ roles as future leaders of a world in which individuals of African descent have a rich legacy.

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As you walk through the front doors of GLA, the atmosphere is unique. Every GLA scholar starts the day at the “top of the world,” passing through the glass-domed entry featuring a map of the world. The world is, literally, at their feet. As scholars walk across a large map on the floor, they are reminded of the school’s motto, *“Preparing future leaders of the world,”* and challenged to grow into the greatness that statement articulates.

The administration and teaching staff promote the motto daily. Principal Tamika Evans notes, “GLA does all the things that most K-8 buildings do. However, there are some things that most schools don’t do, such as year-round schooling, global excursions, single-gender classes, positive cultural centering and a focus on global leadership.” Each of these elements is intentionally designed to cultivate a strong sense of self and identity among predominately African American scholars, and develop the critical thinking and 21st Century Skills that scholars will need to assume leadership roles and fulfill their inherent potential. When you talk to staff members, there is a commitment to and urgency for the education of “their” children. Significant professional development and support is provided for teachers and staff to ensure a profound understanding of the GLA message and its impact on scholars.





GLA's sixth graders spend the year taking an in-depth look at American history, paying special attention to the nation's Civil Rights movement. While these young people debate Jim Crow laws from the South and answer text-dependent questions about the Freedom Riders, their learning doesn't become etched in stone until they board a bus and travel south just as the Freedom Riders did. They tour Dr. King's childhood home, sit in the pews of Dexter Baptist church where he ministered, and stand in the very spot at the Lorraine Motel in Tennessee where he was assassinated. These meaningful experiences transcend what is achieved in a traditional classroom setting, even one of the highest quality of instruction.

In the seventh grade, GLA scholars spend a year learning about the Underground Railroad. For their culminating learning experience, they leave the United States and venture north to Canada. Departing from the historic Belmont Mansion, a former stop on the Underground Railroad, these seventh graders make the same journey to Canada that their enslaved ancestors made to gain freedom. Perhaps the most powerful part of the trip is when scholars walk across the Ohio River, symbolically marking the journey their ancestors made to freedom.

Eighth grade scholars at GLA study the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans, and its economic and social implications in the Caribbean. For their global excursion, they travel to the Bahamas, where they explore its unique political system, tour the Bucks National Historic Site and visit the schools of pen pals with whom they've corresponded for months. Breakthroughs often occur when scholars see firsthand "the door of no return" and walk up the same steps that brought their enslaved ancestors from crowded ships to a strange, new land. It is experiences like these that build a different mindset within GLA scholars. They begin to develop a strong sense of purpose and an understanding of their place in this world as future leaders.

Global excursions not only change the lives of the middle school scholars themselves, but equally impact their parents and families. Each excursion is chaperoned by numerous parents, teachers and staff. Parent chaperones rave about how their own lives are changed. This exposure gives families from West Philadelphia, the majority of whom would not have otherwise had the opportunity, a means through which to broaden their own perspective on the world in a deep and meaningful way. This shift has significant impact on parents' abilities to envision the leadership roles to which their scholars will one day rise, deepening their support for the work of GLA and our shared expectations for their scholars' greatness.



Recognizing that it is not enough to learn about the world, GLA's educators teach scholars how to change it. Encouraged to think globally, and act locally, GLA scholars are encouraged to give back to their community through various service learning projects. Doing so grounds their academics in a meaningful context for what it means to "serve" as leaders. They become change agents. GLA's calculated choice to dedicate its energy to addressing a student "engagement gap," instead of the typical "achievement gap," has yielded a school culture that cultivates compassionate, socially conscious student leaders fully aware of their potential to impact the world around them.

While reading, writing and arithmetic are crucial components of the educational experience, GLA believes it is equally important to instill within its scholars a strong sense of self. The concepts of self-efficacy and connection to community are embedded within many aspects of the school's culture beyond service learning. Each morning, students begin the day in a large Harambee circle. Harambee, a Swahili term meaning "to come together," is a way to begin the day with a positive mindset. Scholars recite powerful and affirming words, acknowledging in their pledge that they are "wonderfully made." They recognize one another, sing songs and chants, and learn about a daily Sankofa fact that highlights a prominent African American figure or moment in history. Harambee always ends with a reminder that scholars are descendants of kings and queens. Assistant Principal Bar-Rae Choice affirms that GLA scholars not only descend from greatness but they are inherently great themselves.

Verbally affirming the scholars' greatness is GLA's powerful strategy to enforce high expectations through a culturally responsive, affirming and Afrocentric school culture. GLA's core values, affectionately referred to as the "GLA Jewels," live and breathe as do the staff and scholars. It is evident in the way adults speak to children, and how the children speak to one another. Through honor, respect, responsibility, citizenship, diversity, integrity and tenacity, GLA scholars "grow to greatness" each day as they prepare to fulfill their roles as future leaders of the world.





**Point of Proof:**

# DESTINED FOR A DREAM FOUNDATION, INC. PROGRAM: LITERACY FIRST

PHILADELPHIA–LOWER BUCKS COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

## WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”

An achievement gap separating Black from white students has long been documented. For example, only 12 percent of fourth-grade Black male students performed at or above proficiency in reading on the 2009 National Assessment for Educational Progress, compared with 38 percent of white males. Literacy First, has proven, effective methods of early reading instruction for young African American males. At the inception of the program in 2008, the literacy profiles of young, struggling African American males were alarming. Literacy is the critical foundation of all learning and serves as a “keystone” for opportunity and success.

We examined nine elementary schools of young African American males in our local community. Results from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading/ writing exam of students in 4th, 8th, and 12th grades indicated the vast majority were not meeting educational standards for writing as well as reading proficiency, with 72% of 4th graders, 69% of 8th graders, and 77% of 12th graders scoring at the Basic or Below Basic level in literacy.

Our Literacy First program has shown a high rate of success among our young African American male participants, which consist of K-8th grade. Since inception, 85% of our students have increased by one grade level. After adopting our Literacy First model, there was an increase among the youth we served, particularly, young African American males. In less than one year, ninety-six percent (96%) tested

slightly above average or increased their reading grade level. Our Literacy First program focuses on phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

## WHAT IS THIS PROJECT’S ELEVATOR SPEECH?

Destined for a Dream provides programs to youth that support continuing education after high school. The program creates and enhances options that youth otherwise might not have considered for their future, promoting self-empowerment by working closely with the schools and students, aggressively addressing literacy, college and school selection, as well as assisting youth in developing a plan tailored to fit their individual needs. Destined for a Dream offers two programs:

- **Dream Academy:** a college prep training program for students centered on building resiliency and encouraging them to pursue higher education, while simultaneously deterring them from engaging in maladaptive and high-risk behaviors by providing alternatives through basic skills training and part-time summer employment.
- **Literacy First:** Literacy First is an accelerated program for students to increase their English language skills. Literacy First helps students reach at least grade level for reading abilities by providing a 24-session curriculum based program focused on reading fluency, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary and comprehension.

## WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?

Destined for a Dream Foundation serves youth across several school districts in Pennsylvania. Our largest district is Bristol Township, Bucks County, PA. Eighty percent (80%) of the youth we serve live in TANF-eligible households. Many of the neighborhoods, particularly in Lower Bucks County, are home to underprivileged and underserved children and families. Furthermore, many lack the skills needed to earn a competitive wage. Seventy-three percent (73%) of our students are referred by their school’s guidance office.

We have served over 6,500 students, families and churches since the program began in 2008. Key demographic includes:

- Race: 65% African American; 30% white; 5% other...
- Economic status: Low to moderate income.
- Level of Education: Over ninety percent (90%) of youth participating in the program would be first generation college students.





### HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

Our success is measured by students achieving at or above grade level, within a year enrolled in the program. Students who have previously scored basic or below basic on their reading pre-assessment are now able to:

- (a) Identify passages and text that will engage the reader/writer
- (b) Present reading material that will promote growth in the classroom
- (c) Strengthen their concept of reading by providing structure
- (d) Write and demonstrate the connection within their work
- (e) Provide fluency and comprehension strategies

Many of our students are three to four grade levels behind and have an Individual Education Program (IEP). Monthly, we are able to grow our students closer to reading at or above grade level.

### HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

We track our students from the beginning of the program. The moment they enroll in the program, we conduct a full assessment. Students' guidance counselors also keep us informed quarterly on the student's progress. Nearly, 50% of our elementary K-8, African American males have IEP's. Therefore, we are invited to the meeting to provide input and are able to track their performance.

Currently, we use the Wilson Reading program strategies along with our teaching methods. Our Literacy First program is evaluated by pre and post testing in Literacy.

### WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

For our students, we find success when we clearly define goals and are creative with the student. We set daily, weekly, and monthly reading goals for our students, and students consistently participate. Secondly, we chart students' progress towards goals, so that students know how well they're doing. We reward students and their progress with certificates, gift cards, books and other gifts. Lastly, we involve the school, parents and the community. Studies show that parents who read with their children raise children who like to read. We invite the school and the parents to special events and closing award ceremonies. We collaborate with the public library by coordinating special events and programs. We also have built relationships with various sports teams to participate in special literacy first events. In short, we practice the African proverb, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

### WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

As a nonprofit and because we want to ensure access to our program to those who most need it, we charge a minimal fee for our Literacy First program. Over half of our parents are unemployed or low-to-moderate income. It becomes a challenge when we have to renew our program materials. Materials for the program are costly. Therefore, in order to see the success of the program we have to solicit donations, link with local libraries, as well as partner with local banks. Ensuring long term funding remains our most significant challenge.

### HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

We have managed to build a base of support and are funded through various donors, gifts, in-kind donations, and grants. We charge a small monthly fee for our Literacy First program which assists in generating revenue. We also have several fundraisers throughout the year which help to offset costs.

### HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

While every community has different needs among our children, the majority of school districts in the areas we serve have very low reading scores among African American boys. We provide weekly 1:1 sessions with students, and develop an individualized program based on their assessment results. We build a plan around what works for the struggling reader, providing children with the necessary tools to become strong readers.

### WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

There are several reading programs that are known for their success. However, many programs geared towards youth are not affordable or within our communities. Furthermore, they often do not provide effective support for students with special needs and are significantly behind grade level. We are financially accessible to those families most in need. We also provide structure and take the necessary time with each student to provide individualized ongoing support. If students come to our program with special needs, we provide the necessary assistance. With persistence and individualized supports that meet the needs of our students, we help alleviate the literacy issues so many of our people face.



# PENNSYLVANIA POLICY VARIABLES & BENCHMARKS

- Meets the American Academy of Pediatrics' EPSDT screening recommendations.<sup>1</sup>
- State has adopted Medicaid Expansion.<sup>2</sup>
- Has early learning standards or developmental guidelines for infants and toddlers.<sup>3</sup>
- Income eligibility for public health insurance (Medicaid/CHIP) at or above 200% of the federal policy level (FPL).<sup>4</sup>
- The state minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour.<sup>5</sup>
- Childcare regulations require one adult for every 10 children and the maximum class size is 20.<sup>6</sup>
- Single parent families of three living below 123% FPL (Federal Poverty Level) are exempt from personal income tax.<sup>7</sup>
- Sets copayments for child care subsidies at 10% of income for a family of three at 150% FPL.<sup>8</sup>
- State has comprehensive, free-standing standards for social emotional learning at the K-12 level.<sup>9</sup>

Total state spending on PreK:

**\$145,553,522**

PreK enrollment:

**25,622**

State spending per child:

**\$5,788**

Federally-funded Head Start enrollment:

**26,940**

## A note about the use of the words African American and Black

The descriptive terms "Black," "African American" and "culture" are defined and used in so many different ways in social science literature that we believe a note of explanation is in order with respect to their use here.

At the National Black Child Development Institute, we operate from the assumption that race and culture are separate concepts—race being based on skin color and culture being based on socialization. Because the characteristics and trends we are most concerned about in this discussion are both racial and cultural in origin, we use the term "Black" to describe children and families who are both racially Black and of African origin throughout the diaspora. To stay true

to the language of other writers, however, African American also appears in their direct quotes and references to their original research, even where their descriptive reference is both racial and cultural.

When, however, we are specifically talking about cultural patterns, we use "African American" to describe learned values, traditions, beliefs and behaviors with specific reference to Black people of African ancestry, recognizing that there is variation between and within groups of specific geographic and historical origin as well as generational variations.



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## POLICY VARIABLES & BENCHMARKS

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NBCDI encourages a diverse presentation of ideas and opinions. Readers should note that an organization or idea's inclusion in this report does not necessarily constitute an endorsement on behalf of NBCDI and that the findings, recommendations and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of NBCDI, nor of our funding partners.

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