All Dressed Up with No Place to Go

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REFORM AND MICHIGAN’S AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

Vernon C. Polite, Cheryl Price, and Kristy Lisle

Poor high school graduation rates are a matter of grave concern at both the national and state levels. Nationally, the high school graduation rate for European American students is 78%; for Asian American students, 72%; for African American students, 55%; and for Hispanic American students, 53%. At 48%, African American male students have the lowest graduation rates of any subgroup nationwide (Green & Winters, 2006). In the state of New York, only 43% of the 1.1 million students in public school districts graduate from high school (Green & Winters, 2006). In California, fewer than one in four, or 23%, of ninth-graders graduate from high school after completing the course sequence. Latino and African American students in that state are three times less likely to graduate with the essential skills diploma (Education Trust, 2003). In Georgia, 64,000 boys were part of the high school class of 2005 when classes began in fall 2001, but only 40,000 made it to their senior year. Sadder still, no one in the state of Georgia can really explain what happened to those 24,000 boys (Downey, 2006).

The aforementioned dismal figures are more staggering when one considers that a high school diploma is the threshold requirement for acceptance into college,
the military, and many higher-paying careers (O’Neill, 2001). Students who find themselves without the benefit of a high school diploma have limited options in their adult lives. They are at an even more enormous disadvantage in terms of their school-to-work transition, potential for personal achievement, and—not least of all—self-esteem (O’Neill, 2001). Strident voices in the K–12 educational policymaking community have warned that poorer-performing groups of high school students (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, low-income pupils, and students with disabilities) may experience increased grade retention and dropout rates as standardized testing and school-exit pressures change and increase. For example, one in four high school students in the state of California and one in three in Los Angeles drop out of school (Landsberg & Blume, 2008).

In several states, for example, New York, instead of receiving a high school diploma upon graduation, students who fail to master the course content but who perform adequately on the required exit examinations are offered a “certificate of attendance.” Students who receive such certificates are at greater risk of not returning to school at some later time in their lives to earn their diplomas. The alternative for many of these students is to drop out of high school altogether rather than face the possibility of not graduating.

Many states that have instituted the new secondary education standards focusing on student and teacher accountability along with the revised high school graduation requirements legislated by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 have begun to realize the negative impact those requirements are having on a number of school districts, especially those that serve large numbers of students at the margins of society, including the poor, minorities, and the differently abled. School district personnel have much to consider and learn from states and districts that have already begun to experience the impact of the NCLB’s high-stakes testing and revised graduation requirements. Research examining the outcomes of NCLB-mandated high school exit examinations has identified several areas that have become problematic for schools and students at the state level. For example, among the 24 states that currently require exit examinations driven by the new content standards for diploma candidates, 19 withhold diplomas from students until they retake classes to pass the examination (Ashford, 2003).

In Louisiana, 2,000 students left the New Orleans public school system in 2003 because they did not want to take the exit exams. California opted to delay its exit examination requirement for two years in 2003 because large numbers of
its students were not graduating from high school. In Florida, 12,600 seniors failed that state’s high school exit examination, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (Ashford, 2003).

As school districts struggle to meet the NCLB mandates to raise academic achievement and revise high school graduation requirements, reform measures are surfacing in state departments of education across the nation. The current national trend among secondary schools is to infuse one or more of these reforms into strategies aimed at elevating successful high school exit rates to lessen the achievement gap. In the state of Michigan, Ackley (2005) has argued, the recent reforms mandated by the state board of education will enable Michigan to reclaim its prominence as a world leader in education and a producer of a highly skilled and competent workforce. Some of the salient components of the state board of education’s reform plan include mandates calling for high academic standards and new roles for counselors and school administrators. Also included in the new Michigan high school graduation requirements is the added requirement that all students must take and pass the Michigan Merit Examination (MME). In the 2006–7 school year, the previous Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) high school exit test was replaced with this new school assessment system.

Previously Michigan’s high school graduation requirement mandates were left to the good judgment of local educational agencies to determine. Subsequently, the only requirement was that students complete one unit of civics (e.g., a course in government).

The new requirements call for a more comprehensive course sequence that supports current content standards in English, health and physical education, mathematics, science, and social studies (see table 1). The overarching goal of these new state mandates, the state superintendent of Michigan public schools, Mike Flanagan, insists, is to ensure that every Michigan student is afforded the opportunity to acquire a useful skill set and a first-rate education.

In the year 2000, the average African American man earned 58% of the average White American man (National Urban League, 2007). Not only have African American men traditionally earned less than their White American counterparts, their unemployment rates have remained nearly twice as high (National Urban League, 2007). The precarious employment status of a large percentage of African American men adversely affects their families, communities, and society in general. In Michigan as elsewhere, the strength of the African American community depends
in large part on the ability of schools to sufficiently engage African American males and prepare them to enter and succeed in the workforce. Education is key to securing the future of this challenged segment of the state’s and the nation’s citizenry. The mandates of No Child Left Behind call for a 90% graduation rate of all students across all school districts. However, the suspension and expulsion rates of Michigan’s African American males (31%) will adversely affect the overall graduation rates of the school districts in Michigan where these students are most concentrated (Green & Winters, 2006).

Research has shown that promoting African American students’ belief in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>NUMBER OF CREDITS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government/Civics (½)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics (½)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. History and Geography, World History and Geography (2)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 12 or Humanities or CTE*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algebra 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geometry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algebra 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One additional mathematics or math-related credit (Mathematics must be taken in senior year.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics or Chemistry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One additional science credit*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Physical Education (each ½ credit)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health, personal fitness, team sport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Languages</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credits earned in grades 9–12* OR an equivalent learning requirement for credit for students in grades K–12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual, Performing and Applied Arts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocal or instrumental music, art, music appreciation, art history, multicultural art, or readers’ theater</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Prior to 2006, the only state-mandated requirement was one credit of Civics (Government); post-2006, incorporation of online learning experiences required in each of the mandatory credits).
their academic efficacy is a key component to curbing attrition (Martin, 2005). In educational contexts, caring has been found to stimulate enhanced academic learning, improve students’ social abilities, and help students to recognize their own aptitudes and talents (Beck, 1994, 2004; Lyman, 2000; Marshall et al., 1996; Mayeroff, 1990; Noblit, Rogers, & McCadden, 1995; Noddings, 1992, 1995, 2002, 2003). Scholars have varying opinions, however, about what it means to truly “care,” be caring or demonstrate caring behavior. The findings of this study suggest that providing a culture of care and support for Michigan’s African American male students, who most likely will be the most adversely affected by new requirements, will be especially critical to the success of the state’s recent school reform measures. Given Michigan’s comprehensive new high school academic courses and exit examination requirements, creating a caring school culture that embraces the whole student and responds to the various obstacles to learning that African American male high school students encounter, both in school and in society, is a crucial prerequisite to these students’ success. Relationships between teacher and student are fundamental to this equation, but these relationships are affected by many factors.

Looking through the lens of a single high school located in a predominantly African American, middle-income community in southeastern Michigan, this study focuses on the impact of the broad-sweeping revisions to Michigan’s high school graduation requirements that have been proposed by Michigan superintendent Michael Flanagan (Ackley, 2005). The findings of this study suggest that Michigan educators must provide their African American students, and especially their male African American high school students, with a quality education within a caring cultural context. An excerpt extracted from one of this study’s respondent narratives was especially telling in this regard. As we examined the effects of Michigan’s comprehensive high school reform on its African American male students, this narrative provided rich insights into both the need for sweeping reforms and the possible ill effects of such reforms if implemented in the absence of an equally comprehensive caring school culture.

**Caring as a Component of High School Reform**

For teacher caring to have an impact, school administrators must construct a culture and community that supports genuine compassion. Teachers not only
have to create caring relationships in which they are the caregiver, they also have a responsibility to help their students develop the capacity to care for others. Therefore, the school operation must be based foundationally on cooperation, shared relationships, effective communication, and an entire school community that takes caring seriously as an overarching purpose.

Caring can help to ensure the social and academic success of marginalized students; however, educators must first be able to understand the student and the context of his or her world “caringly.” This means that educators must come to see with the student’s eyes what the world is like and understand how students see themselves instead of viewing students from the teacher’s perspective disconnected from the student’s outlook. Thus, the teacher’s interest, according to Mayeroff (1990), should be focused solely on the student. Only in that way will teachers be able to be responsive to their students’ needs and development.

Beck (2004) describes how caring relationships are linked to living fully as a person. He offers two purposes or goals as basic to any caring action: (1) promoting human development and (2) responding to human needs. A third aspect of the caring framework is commitment (Beck, 2004). As Beck argues, the associations and commitments between people make caring possible. Gilligan emphasizes that those who care must recognize that they have a “moral imperative—a responsibility to discern the ‘real and recognizable trouble’ of this world” and to act to alleviate suffering caused by that trouble (2004, 8). On the other hand, Marshall et al. (1996) contend that responding to human needs is a situation- and person-specific way of performing in a world that requires individuals who care to be fully and sensitively attuned to the needs of those for whom they care. Noddings (1992) echoes this perspective of caring as relational, noting that it is common to think of caring as a virtue or an individual attribute rather than as a professional skill.

The literature overwhelmingly suggests that school administrators today must abandon the customs traditionally associated with leading a school in exchange for a model that emphasizes caring as fundamental to the lives of all students, staff, faculty, and administrators. Nonetheless, particularly in urban schools with high percentages of poorer-performing African American populations, the absence of a caring leadership model is too often accepted as commonplace by those who are comfortable with bureaucratic, fear-based school climates. As many researchers have found, however, when teachers possess the ability to create shared relationships, meet the needs of their students, and communicate with respect and cooperation,
schools serving poor and racial/ethnic minority populations can positively influence student achievement (Foster, 1993, 1994; Haberman, 1995; Irvine, 1990). Lyman (2000) goes so far as to state that because caring affects learning and every other aspect of school life, school leadership using caring as a model should be a requirement. As Foster notes, focusing on the African American male’s preference for successful teacher-student relationships: “When students were questioned about what made a ‘good teacher,’ the qualities most often cited were firmness, compassion, and an engaging style of teaching” (1999, 17). These students’ best teachers, Foster contends, respected them, inspired them to work hard, and made learning interesting and relevant.

Marshall et al. (1996) suggest that an ethic of caring can provide school administrators with valuable perspectives to guide their moral reasoning and decision making, not as a model for educational leadership in and of itself but as an overarching ethical framework to guide administrative decisions. They further state that when making decisions, school administrators are best informed when they draw from other leadership models and combine the most appropriate aspects of those models in a culture of caring that guides their choices and administrative policymaking. That is, Marshall et al. posit that, by incorporating an ethic of caring, educational leaders can better determine which elements of a particular leadership model or models to use when faced with solving the many situation- and context-specific problems they confront each day.

Bolman and Deal identify additional indicators that suggest the power of caring leadership in the educational workplace. They explain that the pressures of immediate tasks and of satisfying the “bottom line” often crowd out the personal needs that people bring with them to their places of work. Yet caring, they contend, “brings with it knowing about others—[it] requires listening, understanding, and accepting” (1995, 103). Further, when a leader gives his or her workers power, authorship, love, caring, and significance, workers typically affirm the fundamental moral precepts of compassion and justice. When leadership is fused with the spirit of these concepts, Bolman and Deal maintain, the cornerstone of a purposeful and passionate community is cast.

Based on their work with African American male high school students deemed incorrigible in traditional school settings, Polite, Lisle, and Price (2006) have developed a comprehensive model for constructing a caring school climate (see figure 1). Their Caring School Climate Model for African American Youth details
FIGURE 1. A CARING SCHOOL CLIMATE MODEL FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

The Social Construction of a Caring School Culture

Install a Sense of Community and Family
Communicate and Involve Parents or Guardians
Ensure Safety for All
Develop Personal Relationships
Build a Sense of Trust

Practice Shared Decision-making
Model Authentic Caring for All
Set High Expectations and Standards
Teach Affirmations of Support
Focus Individual Needs for All

Tacit Knowledge of Individual’s Needs

Perception of the Individual
Cultural Awareness
Personal Ethics
High Expectations

Social Justice
Genuine Concern
School Mission, Brand, and Identity
Professional Standards

Caring Actions

Trust and Respect
Meet Physiological Needs
Positive Behavior Support
Enhance Self-esteem Building

Create Safety and Security
Meet Academic Deficiencies
Empower
Increase Love and Belonging

Met Needs

Actualization of Holistic Human Growth and Development of At-promise Students

Return to Mainstream
Improved Behavior
Relationships
Academic Abilities
Moral Reasoning
Literacy
Social Abilities
Gained Hope

the wide array of elements that comprise the vital components of such settings. It also outlines the critical indicators for these students’ success and their basic academic and social needs as well as provides examples of the impact of caring action on these far-too-often troubled youth.
The study reported in this chapter made full use of established qualitative research strategies such as those described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). Included among these strategies were over 600 hours of on-site observations conducted among the African American male student population of Metropolitan High School (MHS; a pseudonym), a predominantly African American, middle-income community in southeastern Michigan. The lead author, a former administrator of a predominantly African American urban high school, also attended numerous African American–sponsored cultural events and social activities in the subject school community during the course of the study. His role as a participant-observer in this study was additionally compounded by his roles as both a researcher and administrative employee of the school district in question. This tripartite role offered the study a clear advantage—namely, access to the whole system, its policies, and its procedures. Follow-up interviews were conducted with a smaller subgroup of eight participants from the 1995 and 2006 cohort classes to determine the effects of schooling experiences on the work experiences of these students, who are now men in their mid-30s.

MHS was built with all the amenities of an upper-socioeconomic-level community high school of the late 1950s: complete with a radio station, planetarium, television station, theater, and both deep-diving and Olympic-sized swimming pools as well as rich academic programs. By the close of the 1980s, the MHS student population was predominantly African American. It was also ranked as one of the lowest-achieving schools in the state. While the school was seen as a haven of highly personalized classroom instruction and extracurricular and cocurricular interactions between teachers and students in 1970, by 1980 it was controlled by layers of rules and structures designed to control student behavior, primarily that of African American males. Table 2 offers a detailed look at the MHS African American male Class of 1989.

Although Metropolitan High always offered a comprehensive array of regular and Advanced Placement courses, and although numerous explanations have been offered for the academic failures of its “second-wave” students, the sad reality is that these latter-day students most often did not avail themselves of the opportunities provided by the school. Table 3 reveals the widespread avoidance of academic rigor
TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHICS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS IN THE MHS CLASS OF 1989

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PERCENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduated with class</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated late</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated below average</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated above average</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated with honors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took ACT exam</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scored 16 or higher on ACT</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropped out through nonattendance</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expelled by Board of Education</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved out of school district</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earned a GED or adult education degree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fate unknown</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shot by gunfire</td>
<td>9*</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarcerated between 1986 and 1995</td>
<td>28*</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 115; average age at time of study = 36 years.
* Known incidents

TABLE 3. MATHEMATICS COURSES COMPLETED BY AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS IN THE MHS CLASS OF 1989

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEMESTER COURSE</th>
<th>NUMBER WHO COMPLETED COURSE</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE WHO COMPLETED COURSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Algebra 1</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Algebra 2</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algebra 1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algebra 2</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geometry 1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geometry 2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trigonometry 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calculus 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 107. Eight students who transferred to another school because of a change in residence are not included.
among the African American male students in the MHS Class of 1989 cohort. In the case of mathematics—the gatekeeping discipline for access to the present-day world of technology-rich employment—the majority of these students (60%) never completed Algebra 1, suggesting that by and large they were not prepared to enter the postindustrial era in which they currently find themselves as young men living in Michigan.

Billie (a pseudonym), a member of the MHS Class of 1989 cohort, offered the following rationale for this failure while reflecting on his high school academic experiences. At the time of the study, Billie was working in an unskilled position on the assembly line of a major factory and had attended the local community college part-time for two years. He shared the following insights on his years at MHS:

I think the classes were offered there, but I don’t think the students took them and nobody made [or encouraged] them. The challenging courses were offered, but nobody took them. . . . I don’t think that’s service to kids. All that school had was more rules and [they didn’t] give you anything on the other hand. That doesn’t work very well.

Another respondent, Benny (a pseudonym) was working part-time for a major factory and a clothing store at the time of the study. He had attended the local community college for one year, and was unemployed. Benny’s comments typified the frustrations the study cohort faced when the realities of their poor choices in high school intersected with their school-to-work transitions:

No one ever told me that I needed Algebra 1, 2, and 3; and geometry and trigonometry, calculus, and then all those sciences. I see now with my computer science [college classes] classes that you need to have a lot of math. I stopped at geometry. So it would have helped if I had gone a little farther, but I really didn’t know that [when I was in high school] . . . If I were back in high school now, I would study advanced mathematics and electronics . . . electronics and computers ’cause that’s the field that everything is moving towards: computers or electronics. I really didn’t pay attention to it in high school.

The majority (85%) of the respondents interviewed built their high school programs around courses that had little relevance for their futures. For example,
it was common for members of this group to have taken Ceramics 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 and/or Photography 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, while their mathematics courses, for example, consisted only of Pre-Algebra 1 and 2 and Algebra 1. It was shocking to learn, yet common, for these young men to articulate their lack of knowledge about the prerequisites for specific college programs and jobs. Many reported that while in high school they had postsecondary plans for careers in mathematics, electronics, the sciences, health careers, and so forth; yet the overwhelming majority had enrolled in courses that were clearly unrelated to those fields. Indeed, fewer than 10% had enrolled in traditional college preparatory courses in mathematics. Further, 80% of the respondents took the ACT college entrance examination during either their junior or senior of high school.

A large body of research suggests that attendance remains the most predictive determinant of student achievement (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2003). One of the problems commonly related by the respondents regarding their high school attendance was that all too often they were not sufficiently involved in the academic process to warrant regular school attendance. Indeed, one out of three African American male students in the MHS Class of 1989 was expelled for lack of attendance. This lack of engagement was tied to many factors, among them social distractions, negative peer pressure, and lack of personal motivation.

The narrative of one student-respondent, Kyle (a pseudonym), provided particularly rich insights into both the need for sweeping reforms to address the past and present lack of engagement by Michigan’s African American males in that state’s educational system and the possible ill effects of such reforms if presented in the absence of an equally comprehensive caring school culture. As Kyle related:

At 36 years of age, I have already been at the GM plant for the past 10 years as unit manager. I supervise 45 people who work largely with computers and robots. My job is to ensure that the robots are functioning and the production is maintained at a high level. Most of the persons that I supervise are White and many resent being supervised by a Black man.

I graduated in 1989 from Metropolitan High School. I understand that there were about 115 African American males in my class between the tenth and twelfth grades. It is difficult to learn that out of that number only seven went to college following high school. I am really shocked to hear that news. What is
really difficult for me to comprehend is that only about 30% of those guys ever studied advanced mathematics in high school. And now that I think about it, there were very few Black guys in my math classes. They were in the school, but not in the same academic program that I followed.

You know, those were rough times at Metropolitan High! Many of the guys in my class were caught up with the drug culture and making a quick dollar. I know that many of them died as a result of their involvement with drugs and fast cash. Others are still in jail . . . from what I’ve heard.

I deliberately managed to escape a lot of the negative stuff while I was in high school. I had a lot of help from my counselors . . . who guided me throughout high school. You really need a strong counselor because you don’t go in high school thinking, “Well, I’m going to take this math class or I’m going to take this science program.” It depends on what your career goals are, and in high school obviously you have your standard classes that you have to take. Then, once you take them and do well, it’s only practical to go to the advanced levels.

I was in Algebra, then Algebra 2, [then] Trig. I went on to Geometry and so forth. So, it was a natural progression for me with the support of good counseling. Of course I stayed close to my mentors and counselors. I was close to the assistant principal in the school and another Black male counselor who really helped me throughout the high school years. I just wanted something better for myself—those were my values.

It’s interesting when I think back on some of the Black guys in my class. I think their focus was different. My number one focus was to continue my education. I was an athlete; I played basketball, and I enjoyed the sport. That was my true motivation—one of my highest motivations, second only to my family. Actually, my family was second to basketball because that was my love, and I knew in order for me to play, I had to be eligible; so it only made sense for me to stay in class and focus on my dream: to play for the NBA.

I don’t know about the other Black guys or other students; their focus was obviously something different than mine. Maybe it [their focus] was making a lot of money right then and there. A lot of those guys were in the drug game. I grew up in the same neighborhoods. I found out that their parents were already into it [drug trafficking]; or someone close to them was already involved with “street pharmacy.” So, it was only a natural progression for them to get involved too, being that was [their] family’s way of life.
The economy was so bad with all the factory closings until drugs became a real viable way of life for some. You know, “We gotta get this money” and “We got the drug traffic,” and “We got all of it in our favor.” Some guys’ kids are around it every single day. They come home from school and they see their parents or siblings in the basement cutting keys [preparing kilograms of crack or cocaine] and stacking money. So, yeah, the guys were curious and drawn into the game, and drugs were their primary focus in high school. The reality is the media . . . tends to focus too much attention on a small group of guys who are into crime, violence, and drugs. The sad truth is that most of the guys from my class who did not attend college or trade school are not in trouble with the law, but they are experiencing difficult times since it is almost impossible to get a real job in Michigan if you are a Black male without skills or a degree.

Yes, I saw some students driving those fancy cars. When I was in high school I didn’t even have a car! I didn’t get my first car until my freshman year in college . . . I had to save enough money to purchase it by working during the summer months.

As I said, my primary goal in high school was basketball. . . . Interestingly some of those guys in my class were better ballplayers than me, but because they were not [academically] eligible to play, they never saw the high school court. What a shame! [They were] really gifted ballplayers. Since they did not have their academics together, they were already destined to fail before they ever stepped on the court. The coach at Metropolitan High School at the time liked the clean-cut kids and would not waste his time with the losers. There were some exceptions, but you had to be really, really good.

When I was growing up, the positive men in life were my uncles. I didn’t have a father to grow up with and to teach me all of the things that I know now. It was mostly my uncles that teamed up, and whenever it was their turn to put the time in [with me] they put the time in and made the best of it. I also think that my peers are some of the stronger men in my life—the positive ones. You know, people like yourself [referring to the lead author] when I was growing up, you know, going through high school. You were that ideal man in my life because you were one of those that helped shape me to become the person that I am. You know I never forgot about you or lost sight of you.

I go out there, and I mentor young kids in the city under one of the mayor’s special initiatives. I assist in planning a number of social events for young kids
such as sport events and fashion shows—keeping the kids busy and off the streets. My role is a volunteer event planner. . . . I try to stay involved in community events; everybody should have a charity in their life, some activity when you’re actually helping others. I don’t get paid for this work. It’s my way of giving back and my way of relieving stress in my life. That’s the only activity that I have other than working out at the gym. So volunteering is more satisfying than probably anything I could receive monetarily. I would love to be paid for my volunteer work, but I’m a firm believer that if you put forth maximum effort and you put out a good project and a good product, the money will chase you—you don’t have to chase the money! You know as I get older, I wouldn’t say I’m wise beyond my years, I think I just have a common sense about myself. I’m grounded. I’m not easily impressed. I can look from afar and say, “Wow, that’s a really nice car. I could have that if I wanted it, but do I want that right now? Nah, you know it’s just a ——.” You’ve got to use your head! You’ve just got to have common sense and just not succumb to negative peer pressure. . . .

I’m just trying to seize the moment at this point! I’m 36, and I’m at a point now that I want to retire by age 40 and start my own business. The only work I’m going to do is truly for myself. I’m not going to work for anybody else, and I call the shots now [at the plant] so I might as well call them, truly, for myself.

**Conclusion**

The following policy recommendations are offered to address the unevenness in resources and schooling experiences typically faced by African American males in Michigan high school settings:

- Embrace the concept of caring school cultures and smaller learning communities as alternatives to settings that are insensitive to the special needs of African American male students
- Ensure equity in spending across school districts so that the high schools attended by the majority of Michigan’s African American males—namely, those in some of the state’s most challenging urban enclaves—have facilities, supplies, and equipment commensurate with high schools in the wealthier suburbs
- Recruit and provide incentives to attract highly qualified teachers from diverse
backgrounds to serve in those schools, especially those with credentials in the critical areas of mathematics, science, and technology

- Train or retrain school counselors and administrators across K–12 schooling to understand and respond to the academic and socio-psychological needs of African American males
- Address the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates of African American males

The link between highly complex social issues and student achievement must become central to an ongoing discourse with school administrators and counselors who serve African American male student populations in Michigan. The findings of shared in this chapter suggest that for Michigan’s African American male high school students to excel academically in the post-NCLB environment, several important variables must be present. First among these are explicitly articulated academic goals based on the proposed Michigan standards. Additionally, the provision of challenging curricula, extra instruction, and highly skilled instructional personnel are critical to creating the types of learning environments that can help African American males meet the demands of Michigan’s new high-stakes testing and successfully graduate from high school.

Michigan educators must provide their African American students, and especially their male African American high school students, with a quality education within a caring cultural context. Constructing a caring culture in high schools that serve African American males is essential to success of the Flanagan plan for high school reform. It is also likely to be the most challenging aspect of the current reform movement.

REFERENCES


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